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“Millennials” and “Z”: generations compared

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ABSTRACT

Generations “Y” and “Z” have lived through great changes that have followed the development of the media, first, and then of social media. The digital revolution accompanied by the end of post-modern culture has attempted to defeat the myths, symbols, and rituals that had characterized the mirror in which individual and collective behaviors found meaning for millennia.

The breaking of the generational pact with the consequent absence of a story to be able to elaborate on identity construction has led to a continuous construction of the self based not on “who I am” but on “how I should appear”.

The absence of otherness has created a void and given birth to new pathological forms linked to immediacy or to “everything now and immediately”. In this framework, time and space have lost their meaning and the Other has become a container of rewards without being recognized in its true identity.

Keywords: digital natives, immediacy pathology, clinic of emptiness, social withdrawal.

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Introduction

The identification of generations through letters of the alphabet is quite recent and follows the development, initially industrial and, subsequently, of social media. The last three generations have been distinguished as Y, Z and alpha. Generation Y or Millennials classifies those born between 1981 and 1996, as determined by Pew Research Center in 2018 (Dimock, 2019). This indicates that they grew up during the development of social media. The term "Millennials" was coined for the first time by two historians, Neil Howe and William Strauss, authors in 1991 of the book "Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069", and assigned to this generation as close to the conclusion of studies at the beginning of the new millennium; within the work, the two authors identified with this term all people born between 1982 and 2004, contrary to what was established by the Pew Research Center.

The affirmation, on a cultural level, of post-modernism supported by neo-positivity was aimed at breaking down, in the name of presumed modernity, the myths, symbols, and rituals of the past. The process of disintegration of the iron tradition, permeated with rigidity and formality, accelerates and increases in intensity, like a newly built aircraft that takes off to reach unexplored lands, not knowing if it will take the passengers to their destination which, among other things, will crisis the certainties of the Nexters themselves (another of the names by which generation Y is defined) and of the following generations.

At the same time, a new phenomenon such as the social one was establishing itself with the advent of Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc. which changed not only individual goals but, above all, social relationships: one could stay connected and relate to others while staying comfortably at home. Here is the search for likes as a method of consensus and social success that has led to real processes of "showcase" (Pira, 2021). Furthermore, a study (Sridhar and Srinivasan, 2012) aimed at investigating generational differences, based on quantitative data such as GDP and natural population growth, indicates Generation Y as directed towards self-affirmation and individualism which gets stronger and stronger.

Srinivasan also points out that the next generation Z is that of the crisis in which beliefs are swept away, individualism (albeit present) is gradually accompanied by the diametrically opposite need to return to being united. It would seem a paradox but the crisis phase of Generation Z is linked to the dissolution of the many certainties that accompanied the positivism of the previous one, and new seeds of multiple opportunities are beginning to be planted in the hope of seeing a new and general rebirth flourish. On the other hand, even on a cultural level, the era of Generation Z marks the end of post-modernism.

Mordacci (2017) at the Modena Philosophy Festival states in this regard: "Today we must try to bring order to the world, with the awareness that it is impossible to build a perfect society, but also knowing that we need criteria of justice and truth to propose an acceptable way of life based on shared facts and values. For this reason the contemporary condition can be defined as a neo-modern condition". Even earlier, Umberto Eco in 2011 in a conference held in New York entitled "postmodern and neorealism", in explaining his negative realism, summarized it in the following formula "every interpretative hypothesis is always revisable but, if one cannot never say definitively whether an interpretation is right, you can always tell when it is wrong".



Within this context, the theory of the fourth turning point was developed (Strauss and Howe, 1997) for which every crisis is followed by a phase of rebirth, ascent, or High even if it is necessary to understand what characterizes those who experience this criticality to be able to understand the repercussions and attitudes. Generation Z, in this regard, is called by different names such as IGen (Twenge, 2006), Plurals, and digital natives to highlight the influence that technological progress has had, has, and will continue to have on people's lifestyles and on what they want. The various names indicate that if Gen Y was the pioneer in the use of technology, Generation Z is immersed in the stormy sea of the same, and its waves overwhelm the present like a whirlwind, allowing too limited time to catch a breath; the human race tends towards evolution, projecting itself towards the future, but in this critical phase it is the future that comes towards us, requiring us to keep up to predict the next, unpredictable storm (Gabrielli et al. 2019).

Regarding the aforementioned statements, the characteristics of Generation Z can be summarized as follows:

1. immersion in the digital world since birth; technology has gone from being considered as a means to simplify people's lives to having created real paradigms within which it is increasingly essential to be able to live and adapt;
2. affirmation of one's identity, the search for an occupation or passions that reflect one's personality, and the enhancement of diversity;
3. a high level of education and sensitivity towards issues related to environmental sustainability (Ao et al, 2020);
4. increased use of social media: a recent survey by GlobalWebIndex finds that the time spent by Gen Z in 2018 on social media is approximately 2 hours and 55 minutes a day, an 18% increase compared to last year year and higher than the other generations compared (Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials), even if the significant increase was recorded between 2014 and 2015 (+29%). The social networks most used by the Zers are YouTube (89%), Facebook (77%), and Instagram (74%); special mention for the use of WhatsApp (65%) as there was not only an increase by Zoomers from 2016 to 2018 (+27%), but also and above all by Boomers (+44%). Gen Z does not only use social networks to create and stay in contact with people globally but also (and it is the consequence of contact research) to search for information of various kinds, for example on products to buy and on companies to which you intend to apply.

Despite the widespread use of social media, Gen Z proves to be very vigilant in its use (Haddouche and Salomone, 2018), especially if it compromises the experiences that the individual prefers to experience live, denoting that the need to connect is never ending to itself.

Discussion

The clinic takes place within a context that defines its contours and, at the same time, becomes a matrix of meanings. Human action, human action in itself would not make sense if not inside a container from which to draw lifeblood. Symptoms, disturbances, and pathologies take place within a stage in which conflict and psychic contrast are embodied.

The social and cultural dynamics typical of generations Y and Z produce new forms of pathology which are marked by the need for success, for a strong affirmation of the ego: it is in the need for visibility inherent in the Social culture that we are witnessing a strong expansion of sentiment self, to the point of becoming a form of narcissism that puts one's ego at the center of interest and neglects



the other. Relationships turn into virtual friendships that serve, not so much for an authentic relationship. but to assert one's worth. Furthermore, the excessive availability eliminates the absence which is a precondition of the symbolic: only the absence determines the desire and the tension towards its enjoyment.

It is in this context that Recalcati (2002) formulates the definition of "clinic of the void" since, without absence, presence becomes appearance which tends to fill the self with wadding objects and the new myths offered by hypermodernity. Explanatory, in this regard, is an advertisement from the 90s for a well-known aftershave that read "for the man who must never ask". Pursuing self-sufficiency in which the other becomes superfluous upsets two of the cardinal principles of human development: recognition and belonging.

Recognition involves mirroring oneself in the other: I recognize myself to the extent that I can recognize myself in the other in continuous reciprocity and circularity. In the same way, I can only belong to the extent I belong to the other and the latter belongs to me. The pushed subjectivism that tends to exclude the object is a precursor of pathology.

On the contrary, Arendt (1978) maintains that all living beings "men and animals, are not only in the world, but are of the world, and this precisely because they are both subjects and objects, who perceive and are perceived". Similarly, Sarason (1974) notes that being recognized leads to feeling belonging to a community by establishing a system of relationships and interdependencies to which one's particular interests are subordinated.

The same author points out that this system of interdependence is the outcome of a process and must be voluntarily maintained. This implies the idea that the sense of community depends on individual investments in the function of a superordinate purpose - the maintenance of a specific system of relationships - and on its sharing on a collective level. Everyone, for example, recognizes themselves in their country, in their region, in their state. It is no coincidence that we differentiate Italians from Germans, Austrians from English, and so on. We recognize ourselves within a shared symbolic context to which we feel we belong. The sense of homeland constitutes a process of recognition and develops the sense of belonging.

The bond that binds us to the homeland is so strong that, just as we are willing to give our lives for our family, and our relatives, we likewise put it at the service of the homeland. If the recognition and the sense of belonging fail, then in the 1980s, as described by Cantarella (2023), social withdrawal appears: in the void of the absence of the Other I lock myself up within the only place where I recognize myself and to which I feel I belong: "my room".

The purchase of the object that allows me to never ask, in fact, "can only be an object of enjoyment and never of desire, an instrument of isolation and not an occasion for meeting" (Recalcati, 2011).

The emptiness of the absence of the Other leads to being filled and enclosed within the body. Anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorder are typical pathologies of this historical era.

The search for the perfect image and through it social prestige is a metaphor for the illusion of the lack of need for otherness.

They are unequivocal signs of fear of confrontation with the Other: "In her compulsive drive to devour, the bulimic chews and grinds emptiness, enjoys a full mouth, yet it is the terrible sensation of emptiness that awaits her at the end of the binge and returns to emptiness immediately afterwards just like a rubber band that snaps back: it tenaciously tries to restore it, it wants to find the reassuring presence of the bones" (Recalcati, 2011).

The body is a source of danger: it is through the body that I defend myself from the relationship with the other. Traces of harassment or sexual violence suffered are often hidden behind bulimia, which also creates a memory gap in those who have suffered them. It is the desire to cancel the Other through



closing oneself within one's bodily boundaries that avoids confrontation and makes one pay for the guilt of possessing an attractive body. It is fear, the anguish of confrontation with other bodies that fill the void through excessively swallowing food in a binge eating disorder. It is the autarkic claim of the search for emptiness that expresses a desire for absolute independence that supports anorexia. The absence of the other, the emptiness, can also be grasped in new pathological forms or the revisiting of the old ones through the "pathology of immediacy" (Kimura, 2005) which is the principle that determines the form of social relations in the contemporary world. Just as sociology has long understood well, above all through Baumann's theories, the transition from the society of communication to that of social networks and hyperconnections has led to the modification of the principle of speed into a new imperative: the need for immediacy.

In a society whose hallmark has become aesthetics, the search for beauty at all costs, Baumann (2008) described the relationship between the Self and the Other as a supply of goods and services by the second towards the first. The Ego does not seek the Other in its essence and authenticity but, simply, to satisfy its needs. As highlighted by Muscelli (2014), one is not looking for in-depth knowledge of the Other, but the interest is exclusively aesthetic in which the other is "to be tasted and felt" as if it were ice cream and/or a sweet. In the relationship of immediacy, the other is not the partner to talk to, to account for, to feel responsible for, or to be ashamed of.

This has led to the expansion of Borderline personalities which today are a real psychopathological epidemic. "The presence of the other has dissolved and dematerialized in the "network" as well as in the depths of the inner dialogue; the narrative identity has lost the continuity of explicit time, the one that derives from the effectiveness of the inner dialogue. It is no coincidence that the "pathology of the present" (Rossi Monti, 2012) is typically configured as a sense of absence, emptiness, boredom, and insatiable need - and never as remorse, regret, nostalgia, repentance; or, vice versa, as a messianic expectation, a fixed ideal, a utopia" (Muscelli, 2014).

It is in the new space-time experiences and corporeity that the pathology of immediacy finds its feedback which, in the relationship with the other, again Muscelli, identifies: "in telepresence, in the possibility of being present at a distance, in the instantaneity, i.e. the ability to reduce time to the punctual dimension of the instant, and in pornographic consciousness, a self-awareness that is free from long-lasting narratives but that depends exclusively on the visibility and enjoyment of the body". It is along this axis that the break with previous generations took place, living in a sort of hypertrophy of the present. Relating to previous generations, sinking into one's origins involves a long time that does not correspond to that of immediacy. Psychic times having to follow those of new technologies have reduced as they are unable to bear the wait for a long elaboration for which the commitment to planning present and future action through the reading of history has failed.

This has reduced the responsibilities they assume with previous generations: if I don't feel the responsibility towards family and generational history, I don't even feel the sense of guilt and shame, in short, I feel free from future commitments by projecting my action only on the here and now.

That's why desires fail and only needs are met. As argued by Maffesoli (2003), the ethics of recognition also changes, this too subjected to the transience of the encounter with the other which is characterized by the search for the superfluous, the *carpe diem*, the culture of pleasure, the attention to body and fitness, rave parties, the New Age. All phenomena that have no future, are not situated in the sense of history and are completely indifferent to any finality and that express the idea that the present is sufficient in itself. It is in this present that recognition today takes place through momentary participation without any future purpose and is expressed through the continuous presence of digital tools or by being continuously hyper-connected.

Without a history in which to recognize oneself, transgression understood as an elaboration of one's



origins to relaunch generative action has ceased and the only possible transgressions are the reproduction of those experienced through video games or digital reality. Indeed, generational history not only protects us from the elements of life but at the same time constitutes, in the Lacanian sense, the "place of the other" in which we can recognize ourselves. The absence of models with which to identify exposes young people to not belonging, to not recognizing the value of the "law", or rather of the moral obligations to which "desire" is subjected: "Technological consumerism tends to transform us into individuals with no history and identity" (Baumann, 2003).

The lack of identifying models exposes young people above all to a failure to re-elaborate their origins, leading them to re-propose violent models many times. The need for recognition leads to bullying, cyberbullying, sexting, revenge porn, cutting (Pira, 2021), and new forms of adolescent violence.

The pathology of immediacy has not only brought out new pathologies but has also changed the ways of expressing the old ones. For example, depression shifted from a loss-based to a boredom-based model of expression. If the old forms of depression were linked to guilt and vulnerability, since the 1980s they have become neurotic and are linked to instantaneousness. No longer the regret, the anguish for a past event that has caused irreparable damage that is difficult to repair, but the difficulty of enjoyment in the here and now capable of attenuating emptiness and boredom (Stanghellini, 2011).

Conclusion

The action, the acting must be framed within a space and a time which, in delimiting its contours, at the same time, gives it meaning. Time by its nature is historicized by assuming a before and an after even when it is expressed in the present. With St. Augustine, we know that the past lives in the present through memory just as the future constitutes the projection of present action. In the moment in which history disappears through the break with the previous generations, it becomes difficult to be able to plan future action. It is the moment of suspension, not only of time but also of identity which must necessarily contain a story to be able to plan future change.

The latter presupposes a contrast, a conflict that must be elaborated between present and past experiences. In the absence, identity becomes unstable and continuously changing as it is subjected only to the immediate, instantaneousness.

It is in these conditions that the pathology of instantaneousness arises, which is based on a void linked to the absence of historical otherness. The rupture between generations produces an unfillable void since it does not allow one to recognize oneself and belong to a shared history. The clinic of family bodies, as conceived by Cigoli (2012), which is expressed through the ethicality of the exchange of gifts, based on trust and the hope of being able to be reciprocated, would be amputated by the void, by the absence of a history with which be able to compare. On the other hand, Lacan had already warned that in the absence of the "Other" place, for example, the one in "Name of the Father", a crater is produced which makes it difficult to place a psychotic on the analyst's couch. In the void, in the absence of otherness, the cornerstones of the bond are missing: justice, on the one hand, and trust and hope, on the other. Without the latter, desire tends to immediate enjoyment without taking into account the law: with Freud, we would say that the reality principle fails and the functioning mechanism of the psychic apparatus would be supported by the pleasure principle.

The digital revolution, accompanied by a favorable cultural climate, has fully invested generations Y and Z, transforming time into an eternal connection, deleting the places of belonging, and allowing



them to live simultaneously in multiple places and contexts, which has meant that membership and recognition. If I don't recognize myself and I don't belong, I need to continuously build my identity to adapt it to the multiplicity of connections. The same concept of identity would seem outdated as belonging to a sedentary culture to build a new definition of self-based not so much on "who I am", but on "what I want to look like". The continuous effort to build the self to adapt it to the multiplicity of connections is the basis of the Borderline type personality. The construction of the body through the processes of vitrification of the ego or with the onset of eating disorders is not exempt from this attempt. To escape the ineluctability of this reality, the only way is the psychotic escape present in social withdrawal.

The clinic, and the treatment paths today must use new languages, but above all, they must respond to the needs of immediacy by finding new models and new answers without distorting the fundamental assumptions of the therapeutic setting. The therapeutic relationship can constitute the model of new paths of otherness in which to give meaning to the bond and to recognize the Other to recognize oneself in true authenticity.

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