

Anna FAZEKAS

Youth Beyond Generations

Inequalities, Post-Adolescence, and Hybrid Transition to Adulthood



Review of the Volume: *A maszkon túl – Generációs koronavírus- és válságmegélések vizsgálata több kutatási módszer együttes alkalmazásával* by Balázs Böcskei, Mariann Fekete, Ádám Nagy & Andrea Szabó

Balázs Böcskei and his co-authors aimed to examine the validity of the generational approach in light of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected age-cohort self-definition. As the authors themselves point out, describing societies through the lens of generations is experiencing a renaissance, not only within academia but also in public discourse. This makes both the volume and the research program it is based on particularly significant and timely. At the heart of the study lies the attempt to grasp the concept of a generational "community of experience" through the prism of contemporary crises. The researchers investigated whether COVID-19 created a force field – a shared interpretative context – capable of generating generational organization, and whether young people could detect it and integrate it into their self-identification.

The authors draw upon the approaches of Karl Mannheim (2000 [1928]) as well as Neil Howe and William Strauss (1991). In Mannheim's view, generation formation centers around shared experience, mutual orientation, collective action, and a common frame of interpretation. Howe and Strauss capture the impact of historical processes through collective traits; in their theory, generational division is shaped by *how* these processes are experienced and processed. Thus, their work also reveals a form of shared interpretation, shaped more by lived, experienced processes and changes than by individual life situations, the opportunities (or limitations) of the socio-cultural environment, or even the specific features of macro-social and nation-state structures.

The youth-sociological focus of the research program creates the foundation for an important dialogue within the academic field (Bessant et al., 2024). The discursive presence of researchers and a vibrant academic dialogue also provide ammunition for public debate and for analyzing political actors' strategies (Wyn, 2010, 2011). The concept of youth is a site of power struggles, in which actors of

the political subsystem possess significant meaning-making power. Uncovering the influence of youth-sociological discourse on youth policy remains a perpetually relevant task, where critical analysis of political practices that reflect inequalities, social differences, and disadvantages can gain traction. In academic discourse, the obsolescence of a universal interpretation of transitioning into adulthood is becoming increasingly emphasized, and the blurring of age-based categories as rigid boundaries is a growing trend (Wyn, 2010, 2011; Bessant et al., 2024). This is because thinking that assumes universality oversimplifies social changes, the lived experience of individual life stages, and the diversity of transitions (Fazekas, 2026).

One of the central pillars of the research is examining young people's identification, specifically how lived socio-cultural influences are reflected in youth identity. In this regard, the results validate a generation-based division (primarily built on technological and cultural differences) from the perspective of the age cohort involved: the effects of digitalization and the altered modes of connection brought on by the pandemic (home office, the fading of offline relationships, etc.) can both be detected in the process of self-definition. At the same time, this does not come with an interiorization of generational consciousness: it cannot be stated that "the COVID generation" serves as a valid description of the target group through youth self-definition.

The essence of generation theory is that those affected share a common experience and a shared perception; the resulting similar interpretation of their situation creates connection among individuals. The authors' findings call this interpretive framework and common denominator into question. They argue that, rather than a generational identity, differences and variations reflecting cultural capital, knowledge capital, and media influence are far more evident among young people. Analyses conducted on large-sample youth surveys in Hungary also support the importance of digitalization, as well as generational attributes and habits defined by media consumption (Nagy-Fazekas, 2016; Székely, 2014). From this perspective, the consumption habits of Generation X and the younger generations (Y, Z) are clearly distinguishable; among youth, there is an evident, continuous increase in free time spent at home and in the online space, along with a shift in attitudes toward digital devices (see, for example: digital natives versus digital immigrants). However, describing society purely through the lens of the information society and media consumption falls into the trap of homogenization. It fails to account for inequalities in access, device-usage competencies, application, interpretation, and conscious consumption; it overlooks an individual's exposure shaped by social status and cultural capital ownership, as well as the significance of differing socialization pathways (Fazekas, 2024, 2026; Nagy, 2013). Yet, at the intersection of awareness and accessibility, a key and unavoidable conclusion emerges: the quality of digital literacy and device usage depends heavily on social status, and inequalities can be reproduced in this domain as well (Nagy-Fazekas, 2016; Koltói-Varga, 2022).

The authors capture one of the main critiques of generational discourse precisely by raising the issue of this homogenizing framing. They argue that whether generational consciousness or social status consciousness carries greater weight and is more measurable is a crucial research question. Sharing this view, a generation-based interpretation of society is indeed open to criticism and can only be adapted with limitations. Numerous studies highlight the structural power of status perception and socio-economic position (Csizmadia, 2022; Fazekas, 2014, 2023, 2026). In this respect, findings reveal – among other things – that fault lines (graspable along leisure consumption, migration potential, attitudes toward the family as an institution, and many other factors) are clearly measurable. These carry a structuring force, and the status groups they outline are readily observable within youth society. Because of opportunities arising from existential differences, the characteristics of subjective status, and effects measured through post-adolescent transitions, what appears to be a uniform generation is in fact intersected by well-defined social differences (Fazekas, 2023, 2026). Correlations derived from large-sample national youth survey data suggest that subjective financial situation and status perception significantly impact young people's attitudes toward future plans and their current scope of

action. For instance, the impact of status perception is clearly measurable regarding future decisions and family planning (Fazekas, 2023: 14):

„Fear of further status decline drives young people toward labor market mobility, just as their attitude toward acquiring material goods reflects anxiety, with less trust in their ability to improve status. Among anxious youth [those who fear further status decline in the future], moving out from parents is least likely, as they lack the opportunity due to existential exposure. Status perception plays a decisive role in both marriage and childbearing: a lack of existential security leads to delaying marriage and to scaled-back plans regarding childbearing.”

Throughout the volume, the authors repeatedly refer to determinisms linked to the macro-social and macro-economic context. Along these lines, they primarily highlight differences between political-economic units and nation-states (e.g., regarding the interpretation of the 1968 events). Meanwhile, little is said about the fact that within national borders, countless influences, impacts, and a diversity of opportunities and limitations can also be identified. In Hungary, strong socio-cultural contrasts and fault lines are measurable (Ferge, 2002; Andorka, 2006; Éber, 2020). The reproduction of social inequalities heavily frames individual perspectives. Consider the worsening position of marginalized social groups, those slipping downward under the shadow of a dissolving middle class, or the beneficiaries of inherited privileges among the political-economic elite. On this issue, it is worth emphasizing how difficult it is for researchers to reach families with fewer opportunities, those dealing with cumulative disadvantages, and NEET youth (*Not in Education, Employment, or Training*), which consequently limits their representation (cf. Fazekas-Hamarics, 2024). Data interpretation is always cast in the shadow of data collection itself: the representativeness of the involved, reached target group.

Furthermore, the generational approach is nuanced by the fact that the government narrative in Hungary over the past decade and a half has had a significant impact on shaping generational group identity around similar interpretations of social institutions, values, and cultural functioning (Fazekas, 2023, 2026; Fazekas-Hamarics, 2024; cf. Gregor-Kováts, 2018). This includes an institutional interpretation of youth that defined structural responses to youth needs through family policy. At the same time, government framing placed little emphasis on age-specific features and the perspective of post-adolescent existential exposure. Yet, the prolonged youth phase—the delayed achievement of independence and social maturity—is a defining phenomenon in the life of youth society (Nagy-Tibori, 2016; Somlai et al., 2007). According to data from the most recent wave of large-sample national youth surveys (*Magyar Ifjúság Kutatás 2020*), 68 percent of legally adult young people aged 18–29 live with their parents and/or grandparents, while 61 percent of this age group share a household budget with their parents. Based on calculations from this database, members of the studied age group who have not yet achieved existential independence project both financial independence from parents and acquiring their own home to occur around their late twenties on average (Fazekas, 2023).

Since the 2010s, a traditional interpretation of family or gender roles has been continuously present in both legislation and political discourse, forming a norm and a reference frame for younger generations as well. Family planning burdened by economic pressure, combined with the merging of housing poverty and existential inequalities with demographic crisis management, particularly targets and affects today's post-adolescent, millennial youth. Institutional responses to youth housing vulnerability and difficulties define their scope of action: remaining trapped in rental housing, taking out high-interest market loans resulting in decades of debt, or purchasing a home tied to childbearing commitments (whether planned or forced). This divides youth society, creating fault lines even within generations (Fazekas, 2023, 2024, 2026; Fazekas-Hamarics, 2024). The „CSOK effect” („family housing allowance”) shapes both the present and the future: in a few years, its effects are expected to become measurable in how social institutions and support systems respond to the specific challenges emerging in the lives of affected families (e.g., daycare/kindergarten placement, education, divorce, managing risks associated with infertility).

Both the volume's findings and the aspects analyzed above lead to the conclusion that in relevant research and discourse, rather than relying on traditional interpretations of generations, it would be far more constructive to examine the operation of parallel effects. In the lives of Hungarian youth, socio-economic-political processes carry as much weight as opportunities within their individual micro-environments, global influences, and the knowledge capital and cultural context available to interpret them (Fazekas, 2024; Fekete-Nagy, 2020). When it comes to youth age groups, we can speak of intersecting parallel experiences and identities rather than homogeneous, pure, generationally defined macro-groups. In this regard, youth society is best understood at the intersection of key contemporary global processes, the current political context, the opportunities provided by the micro-environment, and peer influence. As the authors' research findings highlight, while the interiorization of global impacts is measurable, it does not form part of the group's self-identification. Much like Hungarian society as a whole, the determinism created by economic status—along with the scope of action and potential attached to it—frames the formation of youth groupings beyond generations.

Resources

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