

# From suicide to surfing

## Generation X and visions of a fulfilled life

*Rufus Black*

**S**URFING AND SUICIDE ARE THE POLARITIES of Generation X.<sup>1</sup> For this twenty- to thirty-something cohort of western youth, change is the central motif of their lives. Some have learnt to surf this wave of change much as they 'surf the net'. Guided by the aesthetic of sensual saturation, they alight on sites that entertain, inform or titillate. Few of these sites, whether in cyberspace or the material world, become permanent bookmarks in the favourites folder as they search for the next rush of the constantly shaken cultural kaleidoscope. This is a heady world full of possibility for those with the education and opportunities.

For those without access to the elevators of advancement, however, the prospect is confinement to urban gulags of economic deprivation and social breakdown. Faced with the emptiness of such an existence, some resort to a cocktail of risk and drugs to re-colour their world, while others yield their lives to the black alchemy of despair. In alarming numbers, even those with possibility set before them are joining the ranks of the youthful disappeared, as they fail to hold the pieces of their lives together, or as they discover that beneath the surface upon which they play there is, finally, nothing.

If we are to understand the visions of a fulfilled life held or lost by this generation, where X stands for change, then we need to take account of both where they are now and where they are going. Our path for pursuing this inquiry will be to consider a careful piece of qualitative social research into an important segment of this group. We will then be able to deepen the insights this research offers by relating it to leading contemporary sociological and cultural theory. Through this analysis, we will be able to offer a hypothesis about the changing nature of Generation X's visions of life. Significantly, we will suggest that the recovery of a broader vision of the fulfilling life may have an important part to play in shaping these future visions.

### *Qualitative social research and the options generation*

We need to begin our analysis with some concrete social research because it is alleged that the theories of leading social and cultural theorists that we will want to draw upon 'rely on anecdotal and autobiographical evidence, conclusions derived from developments in high culture (especially French philosophy), and contestable readings of popular culture'.<sup>2</sup>

For our purposes, we might usefully consider the work of the distinguished social researcher Hugh Mackay, who has recently published a readily accessible treatment of his qualitative research into the values, beliefs and outlooks of three generations of Australians.<sup>3</sup> Of particular interest here is Mackay's investigation into those born in the 1970s – the second half of Generation X – a possibly more coherent cohort for inquiry because it is arguable that the changes which have occurred between the early 60s and the late 70s have been sufficiently significant to create distinct groupings. Although this inquiry concerns Australian youth, the plausible premise that Generation X is a transnational western identity, because of the global nature of social, economic and cultural change, suggests that it should also offer more general insights.

Change – social, cultural, economic and technological – is Mackay's heuristic key to this generation. According to his analysis, this generation have known change 'as impermanence and unpredictability' and they have learnt from that experience 'one big, central lesson: *keep your options open*'.<sup>4</sup> It is a lesson that Mackay sees as so central to this group's self-understanding that he identifies them as 'the options generation'.

### *Change and commitment*

Remaining flexible and open in the face of change – which, we should recognize, is a very rational response to such a circumstance – has had a significant impact upon those aspects of a vision of life that are related to commitments. At the broadest level, the Options Generation refrains from making formal involvement with community organizations – from churches to political parties – an organizing element of their plan of life.<sup>5</sup> Mackay observes in relation to such commitments that '[t]heir tendency to hang back from conventional commitments can easily be mistaken for a dismissive attitude of disengagement when, in fact, it is simply a sign of their assumption that the world is unlikely to go on as it is'.<sup>6</sup>

Closer to home, the avoidance of formal commitments has made the Options Generation very accepting of a diverse range of family configurations.<sup>7</sup> In their own lives, while some still hold out for the white wedding, many 'are prepared to let experimental cohabitation gradually evolve into a more permanent arrangement, never needing to mark the precise moment of transition'.<sup>8</sup> Marriage is a very secondary question and permanence is not a value to be placed above well-being.<sup>9</sup> They will readily say 'that some marriages are not "forever"'.<sup>10</sup>

### *The moral playground*

From the recognition that, for prudential reasons, the Options Generation values flexibility and openness, we might naturally ask what other things they value. To understand any generation's vision of the fulfilled life, the question 'What do they value?' is central. It is in relation to this question that Mackay observes that the Options Generation 'is probably the first generation of young Australians to grow up without having had a moral framework clearly espoused and unambiguously articulated by their parents'.<sup>11</sup> This is a generation that Mackay sees as having 'been left to develop their own moral codes and to establish their own sets of values'.<sup>12</sup> The response has been, in his observation, 'a good deal of moral "boundary riding"' as they have sought and accumulated experiences, not least those to be found in sexual encounters, dance, drinking and the taking of less legally and ritually regulated drugs.<sup>13</sup>

Mackay also identifies that this generation adopts some values without experiential test-piloting. Friendship is, perhaps, the most central of these. This is a generation that values quality relationships highly and that tends to retain a wide network of social connections with people of both genders.<sup>14</sup> The group remains important as the deck of relationships is regularly shuffled.<sup>15</sup> Friendship in this generation is shaped by a broad acceptance of sexual equality, even if tensions remain between the idea of equality and a view that there are important differences between men and women.<sup>16</sup> Concern for the environment is the other commonly shared value that Mackay finds in this generation.<sup>17</sup>

Where there are few fixed values, institutionalized commitments have little hold and the social waters eddy with uncertainty. Mackay concludes that it is little wonder that 'members of the options generation plead to be regarded as individuals' because, in such a context, 'the process of adaptation is bound to be highly individualistic'.<sup>18</sup> In the end, he observes, 'it is hardly surprising that its young

people defy easy generalisations: they are the products of fragmentation, diversity and unpredictability'.<sup>19</sup>

### *Fragmentation and fundamentalism*

The very fragmentation that is a key driver of the celebrated diversity also presents challenge and threat. Troublingly, Mackay observes that, in relation to this world of change, 'for those who are overwhelmed by it, or have dropped out without being noticed, the world is a bleak and forbidding place'.<sup>20</sup> Even those who develop the skills to duck and weave on the breaking wave still experience its instability and have to work hard to maintain the strength and flexibility for this cultural sport.<sup>21</sup>

The responses to this existential threat of instability range from suicide at one extreme to religious fundamentalism at the other.<sup>22</sup> In between these polarities, there are a number with a quiet envy of the more 'distinctive or coherent "style" of earlier generations'.<sup>23</sup> In all these reactions, there is a desire to shift the metaphor of life from surfing to navigating. The soaring rate of youth suicide in Australia suggests that this desire, which for some is a crying need, may play an important part in shaping this generation's evolving visions of life.

### *Surfing the placeless geography of late modernity*

As we shall see, Mackay's empirical observations and his general proposal for explaining them which focuses upon change and plurality, coheres well with the theoretical analysis of leading sociologists and cultural commentators. Given this coherence, we can use some contemporary theoretical analysis to deepen our understanding of the forces shaping the visions of life of the Options Generation.

The theorist whose work is particularly appropriate for this task is that of the English sociologist Anthony Giddens. In a way that is more balanced than that of many of his colleagues and that is consistent with Mackay's observations, Giddens identifies both the threats and opportunities that the contemporary world presents. It is this world that Generation X have grown up in and continue to inhabit.

Change is where Giddens' analysis begins. We can separate these changes into two broad categories: structural changes and epistemological changes (changes in the nature of knowledge). In terms of *structural change*, Giddens identifies three features that separate the contemporary world from that of earlier periods. The first is 'the sheer pace of change' in which technology is a dynamo.<sup>24</sup> The second is 'the scope of change', expressed primarily in the globalizing forces that are

drawing the entire planet into connection.<sup>25</sup> Thirdly, there are institutional changes: the emergence of the nation-state, industrial production and the commodification of products and labour.<sup>26</sup>

Giddens then seeks to describe the deeper level of transformation that these changes generate and in which they participate. The themes he uses to map these processes are place, time and space. He argues that the structural changes he identifies have led to the separation of time and space (the dimension in which people relate to one another) from place (a particular geographical location). While once people measured time in relation to the scents of the earth and the turning of seasons, with the coming of clocks and universal calendars that custom waned. Similarly, the rise of communication technology has meant that people's relationships are no longer constrained by geography: today it is possible to be more closely related to a friend on the other side of the world than to our next-door neighbour.<sup>27</sup>

Giddens describes the key consequence of this separation of time and space from place as *disembedding*: 'the "lifting out" of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space'.<sup>28</sup> The actual mechanisms he identifies that make this possible are *symbolic tokens* like money, which enable us to engage in transactions in many places and with people in the future, and *expert systems* like transport and electronic communications, which permit us to cross great spaces with low risk and without having to know how it is done.<sup>29</sup> The internet, in which space has become radically separated from place, represents the culmination of such a disembedding process. It also helps us to see that it is this process which has created the structural and material conditions which have enabled surfing to become a central motif of the life-visions of Generation X.

### ***Subjectivity and the weightlessness of knowledge***

Having identified the material conditions for the motif of surfing, we need to turn to the *epistemological changes* that have not only shaped this motif but which have also done so much to create the conditions for suicide. Giddens describes this change as the rise of *reflexivity*. For Giddens, this is the passage from knowledge being validated by the authority of tradition to knowledge as the construct of the self's constant revision and reappraisal. The result, he observes, is that knowledge loses its certainty because whatever is known could be revised.<sup>30</sup> This is the loss of certainty that arises from the essentially modern thought that issues from the Enlightenment.

A far greater uncertainty still is to be found in the ever-expanding circles influenced by postmodern schools of thought. Out of these schools arise challenges even to the diminishing certainties that modernity defended. Postmodern thought, as Terry Eagleton so elegantly summarizes it, is

[a]gainst . . . Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of nature and coherence of identities.<sup>31</sup>

Both modern and postmodern scepticism do far more than create uncertainty. In their distinct ways, each also fundamentally challenges the structures of coherence – those turns and tools of thought that integrate and organize separate areas of knowledge. As Giddens characterizes it, modern thought stands against the integrating structures of both tradition and a religious cosmology.<sup>32</sup> But postmodern thought goes further. It opposes – though only with an unavoidable hint of self-contradiction – the very idea of systems of organizing narratives about history. This creates a sense of epistemological weightlessness in which all the contents of the intellectual cockpit are suddenly freed from the gravity of history or reality: ideas, images and stories float freely about with the cultural astronaut left to play with them as she chooses. We might note that if you had grown up, as members of Generation X have, in the weightless freedom of space, you would have little reason to think – indeed might be slightly horrified at the thought – that these pieces once belonged in some sort of ordered relationship to one another.

Of particular importance for the question of life are the effects of scepticism and weightlessness upon ethics. The subjectivism in which scepticism terminates means that notions of what it is valuable to pursue in life become a matter of individual taste. On the positive side, this more aesthetic understanding of ethics, combined with the turn to the self, has focused attention upon the sexual and the bodily as important goods.

The effect of the weightlessness of knowledge has possibly been even more profound on ethics. It has created the pathology that Alasdair MacIntyre has so perceptively described in *After virtue*,<sup>33</sup> in which individuals join incompatible and often contradictory fragments of moral understandings together – commonly a large piece of

utilitarianism with a few conclusions concerning human rights from some deontological system – in the mistaken, but falsely reassuring, belief that they are doing what people once called ethics.

*The opportunities and threats of universal space*

With this broad sketch before us of the world that Generation X moves within, it is possible to return to the question of their visions of the fulfilled life. We are now in a position to understand the quite radical freedom that forms the context in which this generation constructs their vision of a fulfilled life. For what we have seen is that they are inheritors of both the structural freedom of living in a disembedded society and the epistemological freedom of weightlessness.

In Generation X's construction of visions of life, it is epistemological weightlessness that has an explanatory priority. Having grown up in such an environment of weightlessness, where concepts of the good are subjective and have been loosed from the ordering of coherent structures, members of Generation X are free to play with different ideas of what might be worth pursuing as they seek to construct some sort of vision of the fulfilled life. It is in just such an environment that we would expect the type of moral playfulness or boundary riding that Mackay in fact observes. Though we should note that more than it simply being the case that their parents did not articulate a 'moral framework', such frameworks were generally already floating apart into their subjective and component parts. In terms of the explorations themselves, given that the self is at the centre, we would expect the values played with to be those more intimately related to the self, like friendship, the body and sexuality. Importantly, in such a situation, where the starting point is the freedom of play, we would expect that freedom to continue to be an important part in any vision of life.

Where the playful self is the primary reference point for constructing visions of life, then such visions are likely to be thought unique and flexible by their holders, even if they are less so in reality. Here lies an important part of the explanation for the lack of commitment to organizations, political or otherwise, and to institutions in general, which is such an important feature of Generation X's life-view. Such organizations and institutions still embody historical structures of coherence – even if they are fraying at the edges – which order values in quite particular and distinct ways and which aim to maintain that order indefinitely. Where the individual believes she has created her own particular collage of values, which she may revise at any time, she will

have no strong reason to make a lasting commitment to an external structure of values that only partially furthers her vision of life. The larger the conceptual scope of the organization, the less likely people are to join it – which may go some way to explain the rise of single-issue associations and the decline of the political party.

Supporting the moral conditions for this avoidance of commitment are material ones. As the eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman observes, the consumer culture of mass production discourages commitment, so that people remain open to new patterns of consumption.<sup>34</sup> This also suggests that the culture of mass consumption will exert a constant pressure on consumers to reconfigure their visions of a fulfilled life in order to create new opportunities to make sales.

For those with the means of travel – primarily wealth and education – in the disembedded society of late modernity, then, the possibilities for pursuing a playful vision of life are almost endless. They are able to travel the world by air and internet, to delight in the cultural baubles of the globe and, at home, to enjoy the seduction of the kaleidoscopic culture of consumption. In such a world, Bauman argues, the archetypes are the tourist and the vagabond – the person free to move and the person forced to move.<sup>35</sup>

What is alarming in such a world is that both tourists and vagabonds are killing themselves in growing numbers, suggesting that the anxiety of the age is more a matter of meaning than material well-being. Consistently with such a view, Giddens suggests that the underlying dynamic of self in the contemporary world is the threat of meaninglessness.<sup>36</sup> He sees these threats surfacing when people confront the repressed experiences of modern life: death and other moments of transition (such as divorce), encounters with the mentally ill and the criminal, and experiences of the moral depth of sexuality.<sup>37</sup> More generally, he argues, the demise of tradition, which he does not lament, and of religious cosmologies means that people have lost significant resources for managing changing social conditions and for finding ‘the moral meaning of existence’, which, he recognizes, ‘modern institutions so thoroughly tend to resolve’.<sup>38</sup>

The decline of tradition and religion as structures of coherence may have an even greater effect than Giddens allows for, with his focus upon their sociological function. We find a hint of this in Mackay’s observation that some of the Options Generation look wistfully to the ‘distinctive or coherent “style” of earlier generations’.<sup>39</sup> These structures give stability, intelligibility and depth to visions of the fulfilled life. Two features are central in giving rise to these properties.

The first is their realist epistemology, which means that knowledge, nature and a vision of what is worthwhile in life are, at least in part, determined by the givenness of reality rather than being primarily a construction of the self. The second feature of these structures is their connective breadth. This enables them to link different periods of time together and to draw distinctive features of reality into an intelligible whole. The stability – which does not mean rigidity – arises because visions of what is worthwhile in life can be linked to the given nature of the person and the historical explorations of what it means to be human. Intelligibility emerges because the vision is connected with an integrative and holistic view of nature and history. Finally, there is depth because the connectivity of such structures enables a person to draw upon historical explorations of what it is to be human. Of particular importance in this regard are the narrative resources of myths, stories and histories to which people can be connected.

Without the properties offered by such structures of coherence, our visions of life are at risk of lacking depth (because they are constructed primarily through contemporary experience); possessing a highly fragmentary quality (because of their lack of connectivity); and evaporating like mirage (because they are primarily the creation of the self). As a result, the individual finds herself unsupported in a void of nihilism.

### *From surfing to navigating*

This threat of meaninglessness will play an important part in shaping the visions of life of Generation X into the future. While some will seek to live indefinitely surfing above the void, others will search for coherence. One option, as Mackay identified, is fundamentalism which, as Bauman observes,

is a thoroughly contemporary, postmodern phenomenon, embracing the 'rationalizing' reforms and technological developments of modernity, and attempting not so much to 'roll back' modern departures, as to 'have one's cake and eat it' – make possible a full enjoyment without paying the price they demand . . . the agony of the individual condemned to self-sufficiency, self-reliance and the life of never fully satisfying and trustworthy choice.<sup>40</sup>

The outlines of another, more hopeful, possibility are emerging in the work of a range of different thinkers in diverse contexts who are seeking to determine what it is for humans to live a fulfilled life.<sup>41</sup> The

very eclectic nature of this gathering, which includes the classicist Martha Nussbaum,<sup>42</sup> the secular philosopher James Griffin,<sup>43</sup> the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen<sup>44</sup> and an important circle of conservative Catholic philosophers led by Germain Grisez, John Finnis and Joseph Boyle, points to the emergence of an important new option for the Options Generation.<sup>45</sup> It is, in fact, the Catholic circle who have developed the most sophisticated account so far. The very existence of parallel ideas in other thinkers suggests that the core notions this group are working on can be freed from their conservative constraints as part of the process of forming a contemporary structure of playful coherence.

Within the limits of this space, we might briefly note two resources for this project from the thought of the Catholic circle. The first is their substantive account of human fulfilment which, while grounded in the reality of human nature, remains profoundly open. Standing against limited, spiritualizing and hierarchical conceptions of what brings well-being to human life, this circle argues that flourishing is to be found by the pursuit of: our bodily well-being; knowledge; beauty; play; creative activity; harmony with others, our feelings, conscience and the more-than-human.<sup>46</sup> In this account, the key elements of a flourishing life to which postmodernity has called our attention, such as bodiliness, the emotional life and the aesthetic, each has its place. But there is no hierarchy among these dimensions of our being – rather, they present a horizon of possibility for choice. In other words, while a vision of a fulfilled life needs to incorporate each of these elements, the role, place and order of these values is a matter for individual determination. Nor is their content specified. There will be an indefinite number of ways of making, playing, forming friendship and so on. Therefore, imagination, playfulness and history will be important resources for shaping a rich vision of the fulfilled life.

The second of the resources that this Catholic circle develops is to advance the notion of the life-plan.<sup>47</sup> This circle argues that, faced with such a range of worthwhile goals and the time- and resource-boundedness of human life, practical reason requires us to formulate a life-plan. This is not a rigid structure but a recognition of a form of life we could adopt to co-ordinate the pursuit of these goals, given the unique person we are and the opportunities and needs of the communities in which we live.

Equipped with a broad conception of the worthwhile, a life-plan and a sense of history, the individual facing the universal space of the contemporary world is like an explorer with a compass, chronometer

and a chart that maps the old world with detail but merely sketches the edges of the new. The motif of life then changes from surfing, with its ever-present threat of wiping out into the waters of nihilism, to navigating on a great journey of exploration to colonize the *terra nullius* of the future.

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## NOTES

1 For an introduction to Generation X see <http://www.cc.colorado.edu/Dept/EC/generationx96/genx/>.

2 Linda Woodhead, 'Theology and the fragmentation of the self', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1/1 (1999), pp 51–72, 55.

3 Hugh Mackay, *Generations* (Sydney, 1997).

4 *Ibid.*, p 140.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, p 139.

8 *Ibid.*, p 152.

9 *Ibid.*, p 154.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, p 146.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*, pp 146–147.

14 *Ibid.*, pp 152, 166.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*, p 138.

17 *Ibid.*, p 139.

18 *Ibid.*, p 171.

19 *Ibid.*, p 172.

20 *Ibid.*, p 139.

21 *Ibid.*, p 140.

22 *Ibid.*, p 175.

23 *Ibid.*, p 174.

24 Anthony Giddens, *The consequences of modernity* (Cambridge, 1990), p 6.

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*, pp 17–21.

28 *Ibid.*, p 21.

29 *Ibid.*, pp 22–29.

- 30 *Ibid.*, pp 36–45.
- 31 Terry Eagleton, *The illusions of postmodernism* (Oxford, 1996), p vii.
- 32 Giddens, *Modernity*, pp 103–106.
- 33 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue* (Notre Dame, 1981), pp 1–22.
- 34 Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalisation* (Cambridge, 1998), p 81.
- 35 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its discontents* (Cambridge, 1997), pp 83–94.
- 36 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity* (Stanford, 1991), pp 201–202.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp 202–203.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp 206–207.
- 39 Mackay, *Generations*, p 174.
- 40 Bauman, *Postmodernity*, p 182.
- 41 For a valuable critical survey of this group see Sabina Alkire, 'Basic dimensions of value: a comparison of related accounts' in Nigel Biggar and Rufus Black (eds), *The revival of natural law* (London, forthcoming).
- 42 See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, 'Human capabilities, female human being' in Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover (eds), *Women, culture and development* (Oxford, 1995).
- 43 James Griffin, *Well-being* (Oxford, 1986).
- 44 See, for example, Amartya Sen, 'Development as capability expansion' in Keith Griffin and John Knight (eds), *Human development and the international development strategy of the 1990s* (London, 1990).
- 45 Germain Grisez, Joseph M. Boyle and John Finnis, 'Practical principles, moral truth and ultimate ends', *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32 (1997), pp 99–151.
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp 106–108.
- 47 John Finnis, *Natural law and natural rights* (Oxford, 1980), pp 103–105.

OUR HOPES – AND OUR FEARS – for the future lie in the first place with our son. Our lives were hugely altered by his arrival. Overnight we became aware of a huge new responsibility and of something else – our own mortality. I remember, not so long ago, an irrational fear when we parted at the airport. My wife and the newly-born baby flew off and I was left, fearful that something would happen to split us up.

As a husband and a school-teacher I know that the future is no longer about me and my ambitions, as perhaps it was ten years ago; it's now about a family unit and the responsibilities that partnership, a family network, and a school community bring.

It's a privileged position to be in, to have access to the open minds of young children who are desperate for somebody to do something for them – football, acting, youth clubs, music. When you have worked with a group for long enough, you can see the imprint you have left on many of them – a sense of fun, companionship, self-discipline. But the responsibility is what is uppermost in my mind. Sometimes it's difficult to get the balance right. Get it wrong and you have unwittingly sown the seeds of distrust and suspicion of authority. Today's age calls for attention to all sorts of charters, written and unwritten, about children's rights, health and safety, political correctness. They all have to be considered when making any judgement. The pressures are considerable. It's not easy. Maybe it's a natural companion to increased responsibility, but I think it's a bit more than that. It's something to do with the age we live in, this selfish internet age which discourages any real communication between human beings. What makes me still full of hope? It's simply the realization that hope can never be an individual process, something you do alone. It can only be done with and for others, by taking responsibility and caring for others. In the end it's all about what keeps us together as a couple, about a family and about the children I teach.

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