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## Prelude

Generations are fictions.

The act of determining a group of people by placing a beginning and ending date around them is a way to impose a narrative. They are interesting and necessary fictions because they allow claims to be staked around ideas. But generations are fictions nonetheless, often created simply to suit the needs of demographers, journalists, futurists, and marketers.

In 1990, Neil Howe and William Strauss—both baby boomers and self-described social forecasters—set forth a neatly parsed theory of American generations in their book, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*. They named their own generation “Prophets,” idealists who came of age during a period of “Awakening,” and their children’s generation “Heroes,” who, nurtured by their spiritually attuned parents, would restore America to a “High” era. In between were “Nomads” inhabiting a present they described as an “Unraveling.” What Howe and Strauss’s self-flattering theory lacked in explanatory power, it made up for with the luck of good timing. The release of *Generations* intersected with the media’s discovery of “Generation X,” a name taken from the title of a book by Douglas Coupland that seemed to sum up for boomers the mystery of the emerging cohort.

Howe and Strauss’s book was pitched as a peek into the future. Cycles of history, they argued, proceed from generational cycles, giving them the power to prophesize the future. Certainly history loops. But generations are fictions used in larger struggles over power.

There is nothing more ancient than telling stories about generational difference. A generation is usually named and framed first by the one immediately preceding it: The story is written in the words of shock and outrage that accompany two revelations: “Whoa, I’m getting old,” and “Damn, who are these kids?”

Boomers seem to have had great difficulty imagining what could come after themselves. It was a boomer who invented that unfortunate formulation: “the end