Sherry Ortner, in her piece entitled “Generation X: Anthropology in a Media-Saturated World,” asserts that, “Most theorizing in the late 20th century is quite eclectic, drawing upon a variety of master theoretical narratives, but rarely signing up for one of them in full” (422). In assessing Generation X’s cultural and social context, Ortner claims to theorize with a Marxist approach to late capitalism, class reproduction, and representations of public culture. While Ortner does this well, I would also argue that she depends heavily on structuralism, the dynamics of phenomenology, and psychoanalysis to assess diachronic and emic perspectives of the generation’s social context.

Ortner asserts that “a free play of signifiers with no referent…” has created the discourse of Generation X:

One can see the play of various positionalities, interests, political claims, and marketing intentions at work in the competing representations. One can see as well that Generation X has quite literally been brought into being in the play of these representations. (416)

However, she reduces this complexity when highlighting Generation X’s discourse through structuralism. This perspective only focuses on presenting the existing public representations of Generation X – not explaining the process of how they came to be. In this spirit, Foucault describes structuralism as a “…refusal of analyses couched in terms of the symbolic field or the domain of signifying structures, and a recourse to analyses in terms of the genealogy of relations of force, strategic developments, and tactics” (114).

Utilizing external sources – namely the media – Ortner characterizes baby boomers and Gen Xers through sets of binary opposing characteristics. This construction reflects Levi-Strauss’ principal of mediated binary opposition, which he considered to be pervasive at all levels of human life (Perry 108).
Ortner utilizes this system as she classifies—linguistically and socially—Generation X’s discourse. Generation X is essentially defined as what it isn’t—the baby boomers. This parenting group is “contradictorily portrayed” as “hippies” and “yuppies,” with a mediating quality of self-indulgence. In opposition, Generation X is classified as the older group’s “clean-up crew.” Structuralism’s emphasis on reciprocity between opposing bodies is apparent in the relationship between baby boomers and Generation X, as there is a tendency to blame the other group for perceived shortcomings. In addition, Generation X is further characterized within two polarities in discourse and attitude, the “slackers” and “whiners” (417). Undoubtedly, this perspective requires Ortner to do a great deal of homogenizing. Recognizing this, however, she seeks to investigate discrepancies within these characteristics in later analysis.

For Ortner’s purpose in classifying the discourse of baby boomers and Generation X, structuralism provides an accessible contrast of attitudes and ideals within complex cultural phenomena. While structuralism disregards the extensive social implications of these concepts (Ortner only acknowledging them briefly), utilizing this perspective allows her to construct a framework through which she can further investigate the Generation X experience, particularly economic polarity.

As Ortner describes the structuralist representation of Generation X—set forth by media and ethnography—she also realizes that discrepancies exist within. Instating the Marxist perspective, Ortner seeks to further analyze the economic and institutional inequality that has fostered the binary opposition within Generation X’s discourse.

Theories of representation, in turn, compel us not to think not only about the relationship between a signifier and its referent, but about representations as produced and consumed within a field of inequality and power, and shaped as much by those relations of production and consumption as by the nature of the supposed referent. (434)

Ortner contends that the emergence of “late capitalism” has created this imbalance within the middle class of Generation X. A transformation of the middle class has caused changes in capital/labor relations and the social context of the proletariat and bourgeoisie. Ortner provides some diachronic perspective—in the 1970s and 1980s, emerging changes in the economy initiated a rift in the traditional middle class:
...The middle class started pulling apart at the middle. The economy suffered a series of setbacks, and the overall level of prosperity began to slip...the top and the bottom of the middle class began pulling away from one another. Since that period, the upper middle class has done better and better, while the lower middle class has been slipping down into more and more difficult straits. (423)

Characteristic of Marxism, Ortner catalogs these new classes not as zones of wealth, but roles – the upper middle class as the “professional-managerial class” and the lower middle class as holders of the “McJobs” (428, 432).

Ideologies, the Marxist perspective claims, mask the material relations that determine all components of life. Generation X would claim that its condition is guided by ideologies, such as the desire to pursue happiness, achieve success and plenty, uphold generational expectations, and gain prestige. However, Ortner contends that the transformation of the middle class and emergence of late capitalism is grounded in materialism:

The most prominent characteristics are economic: there are not enough jobs, there are certainly not enough well-paying jobs, and there are particularly not enough quality jobs available for the level of education and qualification many members of the cohort have achieved. (417)

The tension between class, power, and economic roles also echoes a materialist sentiment. As one lower middle class woman described, her family was “a Sears Roebuck family living in a Bloomingdales’ community” (424).

The Marxist perspective is useful for Ortner in this discussion, as it allows her to analyze inequality within the economic condition of the upper and lower middle classes. In this investigation, she classifies the intensifying gap between these two groups as materialist in nature, and the classes emerging with late capitalism as filling specific roles within the economy and power structures.

Ortner, however, does not fully rely on a Marxist perspective to analyze the Generation X experience - there are times when it just doesn’t make sense. Marxism asserts that, for example, the upper middle class is becoming increasingly well off. It would be reasonable, then, to assume that their children – Generation X – should be dominating the capitalist system and climbing into the bourgeoisie. However, according to Ortner’s ethnographic investigation, her informants’ reality deeply contradicts this expectation. Instead, the group’s experience and economic situation is steeped in insecurity.
Acknowledging this discrepancy, Ortner recognizes the need to explore the experienced qualities of Generation X. Seeking an emic perspective to the emotional bearing of Generation X’s discourse, Ortner employs phenomenology:

Finally I reminded myself of the cardinal rule of ethnography: the informant is always right. Even if, ‘objectively,’ these kids had nothing to worry about, there was something experientially real to them about the doomsaying forecasts of the Gen X literature, and this needed to be captured by the argument. (427)

Her approach parallels that of Downey’s, who utilizes phenomenology as a method of moving past cultural hermeneutics and into the exploration of an individual’s perception and experience. He writes, “...I had to be ready to let go of the assumption that experiential reality was made entirely of ‘meaning’...Rather, it is about training, appearances, behaviors, and their effects” (19-20, italics in original). His emphasis, a method Ortner begins to explore, is anthropological analysis not as an outsider looking into the experience, but as an insider looking out. Applying phenomenology allows Ortner to investigate the emic experience, and consequences, of a discourse essentially created by outside sources. The use of this perspective also reemphasizes the point that analysis needs to return to the personal experience, the lived reality, instead of being caught up in the theoretical.

Ortner’s phenomenological investigation provides access to Generation X’s response to the transformation of the middle class. The reaction actually proves to be quite dramatic, which Ortner recognizes in her metaphor of the “abyss:

Since the abyss is in many ways real, it takes no sleight of hand for the representations to be convincing. What is elided by the idea of “generation,” however, is that people’s relationships to the middle-class abyss are very different. Depending on which edge one is standing on, the configurations of anger, fear, anxiety, and resentment will vary. (423)

Youth from the upper middle class are increasingly fearful of not achieving the prestige or quality of livelihood they have always known. They are attempting to work within a system that is unable to provide good, well-paying jobs that match their skill and education levels. “They expected to do as well as, or better than, their parents. And now they realize (or fear) that they will not, which is why they are angry at the system” (Ortner 430). In comparison, individuals from the lower middle class feel cheated by the system and incapable of accessing anything above their current economic setting. The upper middle class fears falling into the abyss, the lower middle class fears it to be impossible to cross.
Once accessing this lived experience, it becomes apparent that much of Generation X’s perceptions, and disillusionment, is relative to their childhood experience and parents’ economic situation. Ortner investigates this cause-effect relationship with the psychoanalytical analysis, seeking to investigate the impact of Generation X’s development on its discourse. This approach serves as a useful tool for further examining themes she has identified, through emic exploration, within her informants’ lived experience.

Essentially, the psychoanalytical perspective investigates childrearing practices and how they have instilled particular ideals within the Generation X attitude, culture, and discourse. Class reproduction, Ortner asserts, must be examined in the context of family and gender relations:

It also includes the recognition of the deep centrality of family politics, including gender and, most pertinent to the present article, generational politics, for understanding class reproduction. (427)

Ortner asserts that while both upper and middle class parents exert strong influence, the development patterns are very different. Upper middle class parents seek to “front-load their potential for success,” some even admittedly spoiling their kids, intending to get them attached to the good things of life so that they will strive for the same as adults (429-430). Within the lower middle class, the parenting focus is getting kids to “stand on their own two feet” and exhibit economic independence. She notes that the emphasis is on, “…backing children up in case of failure rather that proactively endowing them with a lot of start-up capital and cultural boosting” (430). In both scenarios, there appears to be a tremendous amount of pressure to achieve generational expectations – even when they are unattainable in the currently poor economic setting. Thus, disarray emerges within emotions and discourse.

Ortner has classified her argument as one exploring the interplay between anthropology, the media, and the creation of public representation – essentially questioning: who holds the discourse of Generation X? She claims that, “Ethnographers’‘data’ are part of the journalists stories; journalists’ reporting is part of the public culture and thus part of the ethnographic data” (414). This self-perpetuating influence, in turn, contributes to the multitude of factors that create and maintain public culture. Social conditions, economic settings, proliferating technology, and cultural transitions are bound to have directly and indirectly (via media and ethnography) influenced the discourse of Generation X. She writes, “If at one level the public culture stands over and against what is going on the ground, at another level it is one of the things that is made on the ground” (432).
This dynamic parallels Appadurai’s discussion of deterritorialization, particularly in that it is critical for ethnography to account for the multitude of causal forces and those who have roles in shaping them.

However, as Ortner’s discussion progresses, she disregards the pluralism represented in Generation X’s discourse, seeking to, “…move away from that vertiginous position, and to articulate an alternative standpoint” (416). In turn, she utilizes structuralism and presents the public representation as a cut-and-dry discourse – a difficult transition to make, especially considering that she just recognized the complexity of the social context. Utilizing an analytical framework resembling the dynamic systems theory, this could have been a good opportunity for Ortner to further explore these pluralistic influences. By doing so, she would lend greater credibility to the analytical process she utilized in cleansing social difference and pluralism into homogenous, clear-cut representations of public culture, Generation X, and late capitalism. In neglecting this perspective, she fails to investigate how these representations are being systemically created, and how their effects may positively influence the social process.

REFERENCES


