Saudi Arabia is also, of course, the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and home to Islam's holiest sites, and the king serves as Khadim al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn – guardian of the Holy Places. Because Qatar is the only Arab Gulf State to practice the same brand of Wahhabi Islam as Saudi Arabia, this adds a religious component to their relations that dates back centuries. However, Qatar also supports the Muslim Brotherhood, a pan-Islamic social and religious movement that is in direct competition with Saudi Arabia's brand of conservative Islam.

Iran, the Arab Gulf's nemesis, is likely to benefit most from this state of affairs. For decades Iran has sided with Qatar in its disputes with its neighbours. Until now it has never succeeded in breaking the bonds of language, religion and history, as well as deep familial ties, that have sustained Qatar's turbulent relations with its Sunni Arab brothers in Arabia.

Now, this may change. The severity of the Saudi-led attack on Qatar has underscored the extent to which ancient feuds and tribal hierarchies continue to play their role in keeping the Sunni Arab Gulf divided, unstable and weak. 🌐

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Generation games

The idea that discrete generations can be defined and characterised has popular appeal – though is historically dubious. But should we try to analyse the impact of common generational experiences?

BY ADAM IP SMITH

Inscribed above the dais in the wood-panelled Gustave Tuck Lecture Theatre in University College London is a quotation from the Biblical book of Deuteronomy: "Remember the days of old; consider the years of each generation." It's a poetic and even rather inspiring injunction, but if you think about it too much it's not obvious how to live up to it. Remembering the days of old is complicated enough, but what exactly are "the years of each generation"?

Professional historians don't always deal well with the concept of generations. Once you move beyond family history, it's not obvious how a generation should be defined. How can the beginning and end dates for a generation be anything other than arbitrary? Nor is it clear whether one's generation is a marker of 'identity' comparable to class, race or gender. Should historians be in the business of trying to assign characteristics to a given generation? Should they give rising generations – or perhaps the clash between generations – a formative role in shaping historical development?

William Strauss and Neil Howe think so. The work of these amateur historians has had a huge popular impact: among other things, they coined the term "millennials" to describe the allegedly common characteristics of those born between 1982 and 2004.

Those 'millennials' (who are, by the way, "sheltered, special, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured and achieving") are only the tip of Strauss and Howe's elaborate conception of history as a series of generational cycles. They explain in their books that about every 80 years – every four generations, as they count them – society experiences a crisis, followed by a process of rebuilding, after which a rising generation rebels (think the baby boomers in the 1960s). Then there's an unravelling and a new crisis.

The authors divide every generation into four archetypes, complete with romantic names – hero, artist, prophet, and nomad – who are shaped by the role they play in this cycle of human affairs. A generation is not just the product of circumstances but, in an almost mystical dynamic, interacts with other generations to drive historical change in an endlessly repeating cycle.

Strauss and Howe's schema seems to work cutely when you apply it in broad-brushstroke terms to US history in the 20th century. (In fact, they've provided character descriptions for every generation back to the 15th century.)

'Generations' interact in an almost mystical dynamic to drive historical change in an endlessly repeating cycle

Their generalisations are plausible in much the same way as a horoscope: banal enough to be non-falsifiable, but chiming sufficiently with what we think we know to be superficially compelling. Unsurprisingly, though popular culture is suffused with generational stereotypes, historians generally give such ideas a wide berth.

But look deeper and it turns out that every generation of historians has confronted this topic in some way. The pioneering interwar sociologist Karl Mannheim influenced a generation of historians with his analysis of age cohorts and how they were shaped by experiences of major events. If the event in question was a catastrophic conflict on the scale of the First World War, the gulf between those who fought and those who were too old or too young was too stark to ignore. In similar terms Pierre Nora, historian of French national memory, thought that the rupture of the French Revolution first created "generational consciousness". And in the US, the student unrest of the sixties reignited historians' awareness of how the same event was politicised in different ways depending (in part) on age.

However, in that last example the effect was more rhetorical than real. If the 'baby boomers' did all interpret the world so differently from their parents, why did the majority vote for Richard Nixon in 1972? Generations, in the large historical sense, are not self-evident entities.

Yet, as members of families, we know we're part of a cycle of birth and death. We also know intuitively that common life experiences do shape people's values. In remembering the days of old it is salutary to try to think oneself into the years of each generation, and to try to recapture what they must have seen and felt at each stage of their lives, elusive as that quest may seem. ⊕

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Your discipline needs you

A pioneering project digitising all known history could revolutionise scientific analysis of competing theories – but needs more specialist hands to help

BY LAURA SPINNEY & PETER TURCHIN

Calling experts from across the humanities: you are invited to collaborate in a scientific project revisiting some of the big questions about the past. What caused the rise and fall of sophisticated societies such as the Maya or the Roman empire? What role did agriculture play in shaping their fortunes? Or military prowess? Or religion?

Plenty of theories speak to such questions, but there is currently no satisfactory way of choosing between them. A basic axiom of the scientific method is that a theory must make a testable prediction, but the body of available historical and archaeological information is now so large that testing a prediction against all of it is beyond the capacities of the human brain.

The temptation to cherry-pick the evidence that supports a pet theory is strong, with the result that every theory has its champions, and no theory ever dies. In addition, research into the past has splintered into specialist sub-disciplines that have less and less contact with each other. The insights emerging from these knowledge 'silos' are invaluable, but a counterweight is needed: an overarching, multidisciplinary approach that weaves them into a coherent tapestry, enabling us to ask – and hopefully, answer – those big questions.

This data overload can be addressed, in part, by computers. Not only can computers stock large amounts of data,

they also allow predictions to be tested against them. Theories purporting to explain the same historical phenomena can thus be pitted against each other, until a winner emerges that explains the evidence better than its rivals.

One such computer-based project is Seshat – named for the ancient Egyptian goddess of knowledge – a databank of global historical information covering 10,000-odd years from the introduction of agriculture to the year 1900. Though only seven years old, it is also an example of a successful collaboration between scientists and historians.

A database is nothing without data, and those data have to be collected, entered into a computer and verified.

Armed with the new Seshat databank, researchers are in a position to chart the evolution of social complexity and to probe the factors shaping that evolution

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