

# **Fight Club: The Uncertain Role of Generation X Males in American Society**

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Kimmel, Michael S. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

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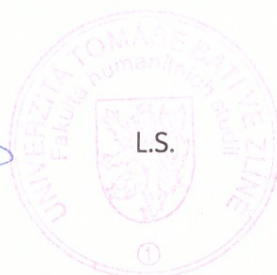
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## ABSTRAKT

Cílem této bakalářské práce je poukázat na novodobou krizi maskulinity a mužství v západních společnostech, a to především u amerických mužů generace X, a osvětlit její možné příčiny a řešení. Krize maskulinity a mužství, patrná mezi muži této generace, je stěžejním tématem románu *Fight Club (Klub rváčů)* (1997) autora Chucka Palahniuka. Úvod této práce se věnuje definování generace X, autoru Chucku Palahniukovi, který sám do této generace patří, a popsání specifík žánru transgresivní fikce. Dále následuje rozbor důvodů, které vedly ke krizi mužství a maskulinity v moderní společnosti, přičemž v následující kapitole jsou nastíněna možná řešení tohoto problému. Závěrečná kapitola se soustřeďuje na popis toho, jak se krize maskulinity a mužství mezi americkými muži generace X promítla do románu *Fight Club*.

Klíčová slova: krize maskulinity, krize mužství, generace X, Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club (Klub rváčů)*, transgresivní literatura

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this bachelor's thesis is to point out the modern crisis of masculinity and manhood in Western societies, more specifically amongst the American men of Generation X, and to explain the possible causes and solutions. The crisis of masculinity and manhood amongst men of this generation is the main theme of the novel *Fight Club (1997)* written by Chuck Palahniuk. The thesis begins with the description of Generation X, and also focuses on Chuck Palahniuk, a literary author of this generation, and continues with describing the specifics of the Transgressive Fiction genre. The origins of frustration of modern men, as well as the possible solutions, are then analyzed. The last chapter of this thesis examines the portrayal of crisis of masculinity and manhood amongst American men of Generation X in the novel *Fight Club*.

Keywords: crisis of masculinity, crisis of manhood, Generation X, Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, Transgressive Fiction

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I hereby declare that the print version of my bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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## INTRODUCTION

“We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War’s a spiritual war... our Great Depression is our lives.”<sup>1</sup> This quote from Chuck Palahniuk’s cult novel *Fight Club* sums up the feeling of a whole generation of American men of Generation X. In a society where there are no great challenges for masculinity, men, who were used to fighting against something, whether it was an enemy soldier or a wild animal, feel lost. The irony is that previous generations fought for the generations to come and live in peace, and yet living in peace, men do not feel right.

The main goal of this thesis is to describe the reasons that led to this state of masculinity and manhood in modern Western societies, where men should be the happiest because they are paid well, they can buy as many materialistic possessions as they want and they do not have to fight in wars, as was their common duty in the past. And yet they feel lost, something is missing from their lives and they do not know what it is.

In addition, this thesis focuses specifically on men of Generation X, who grew up in an era dramatically different to that of their parents whose generation is called the Baby Boomers. Chuck Palahniuk, a literary author considered to be an early member of Generation X, has given a testimony about the state of manhood on the brink of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His highly controversial book *Fight Club*, which created a lot of buzz especially after the premiere of the movie adaptation, became a great hit amongst American men. They identified with the main protagonist, Tyler Durden, as they felt in many ways like him.

In his novel, Chuck Palahniuk introduced his idea of how men should cope with their crisis, which was by creating a group of men who fight together in duels, though not as an act of hatred but rather as an act of confirming their masculinity, which is suppressed in many areas of the modern American society. This thesis will introduce additional possibilities on the subject of how men could cope with the crisis of masculinity and manhood in modern societies in ways that would be beneficial for the whole society.

The last chapter will analyze how the previously mentioned subjects, the Generation X men and their crisis, are portrayed in the Transgressive Fiction novel *Fight Club*. Chuck Palahniuk has incorporated a lot of his own real-life experiences into *Fight Club*,

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<sup>1</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 2006), 149.

furthermore, he felt the need to comment on the topic of crisis of modern masculinity after many discussions with his friends, which was definitely one of the reasons that made this book a testimony of Generation X men.

## 1 GENERATION X IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Generation X is quite a specific generation. Pinpointing it to a certain time span is not an easy task, since scholars themselves are not able to precisely agree on it, but it could be said that Generation X are people born circa between mid-1960s and early 1980s. Generation X is often nicknamed the middle generation, because from the sociological perspective, people from this era were born after the generation of Baby boomers and before the Generation of Millennials. Both of them are larger generations, the Baby boomers with circa 75,000,000 people and Millennials with 82,000,000 people, while there were only about 69,700,000 Gen Xers in 2014.<sup>2</sup> There are more factors to blame for this, such as the invention of the birth control pill or divorces becoming socially acceptable.

But they stand in the middle because of many other things. Their uniqueness influenced even their name, coined by Douglas Coupland, who named his book about this generation *Generation X: Tales of an Accelerated Culture*, and the name stuck.<sup>3</sup> But this *X* could really stand for anything, since Generation X people usually value the right of every individual to define themselves and become whatever he or she wants.

Xers are also a generation in which traits from the past in form of their parents' influence can be observed and at the same time, they also have some attributes similar to the generation of their children. The Baby boomers, born between 1943 and 1960, were usually parents of Xers. Their approach to parenthood was not like anything else before. With great cultural and social changes, heavily influenced by the Hippie movement, the old rules were suddenly not so important.<sup>4</sup>

The traditional model of a nuclear family was not something that Boomers would try to incorporate into their lifestyles at all costs. They rather focused on themselves, whatever it might have meant for them, and they often did not take into account how it would influence their children. With their parents chasing their own dreams out in the world, being divorced or not even married, a great many of Xers lived only with their mothers and

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<sup>2</sup> "Who is Generation X? The Story of a Lost Generation," JenX 67, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.jenx67.com/who-is-generation-x>.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Generace X: Vyprávění pro akcelerovanou kulturu* (Prague: Volvox Globator, 1999), 64.

<sup>4</sup> "Baby Boomers," History, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.history.com/topics/baby-boomers>.

many of them were left unsupervised after they came back from school, which gave rise to a new nickname for them, The Latchkey Generation.

Being sometimes also called Slackers, the predictions for their future were definitely not bright. Growing up, they spent a lot of their free time watching the new popular TV channel MTV, watching music videos and experiencing new music genres that were born, from grunge to hip hop, of which came yet another nickname for them, the MTV Generation. On the cover of *TIME Magazine* from July 16, 1990, they were called *twentysomething* and their ability to become as good as Boomers was questioned.<sup>5</sup> But it has turned out that they had been greatly underestimated and from today's perspective it seems like they were misunderstood, mostly by the older generation of Boomers, whom they called Yuppies, which might be a direct consequence of them being focused on their own life rather than the life of their children, or to be more precise, the Xers. Seven years later, *TIME Magazine* published a follow-up article to the one mentioned above, called *Great Xpectations of So-Called Slackers*. "You called us slackers. You dismissed us as Generation X. Well, move over. We're not what you thought." This text was written on the cover of a July issue in 1997.<sup>6</sup> It suggests an angry message of Xers to their Boomer parents, as well as to whole world, for not being able to fully understand them.

As already mentioned, putting Xers into some category might reveal itself to be quite a challenging task, because this generation is proud to be different. After all, the *X* character might be a different digit every time just like in mathematics and it makes sense that they are very individualistic, because they often grew up alone or without their parents' supervision. Also, the archetype of a loner became cool, it was alright to spend time alone and be emotional. No wonder that Kurt Cobain was their hero in the 1990s. They are considered to be the first generation to ever have access to computers in their schools or even at their homes, which later proved to be extremely important.<sup>7</sup> Their tech-savviness is what made the boom of personal computers and the internet in the 1990s possible.

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<sup>5</sup> David M. Gross and Sophronia Scott, "Living. Proceeding With Caution," *TIME Magazine*, July 16, 1990, accessed March 27, 2017, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,970634,00.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Margot Hornblower, "Great Xpectations of So-Called Slackers," *TIME Magazine*, June 9, 1997, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,986481,00.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Allie Johnson, "6 Ways Gen X Shaped Our World Today," *Extra Mile*, July 4, 2016, accessed April 8, 2017, <https://extramile.thehartford.com/transitions/generation-x-contributions>.

But MTV and computers were not the only new things in their lives, there was also the crack epidemic in the USA between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, which destroyed many lower-income families, and in the 1980s there was also AIDS epidemic. Suddenly, sex became something that could kill people and Generation X, which grew up in that time, had to prepare itself for the consequences of its choices.

In that era, the general focus of the society was towards adults and elders. The American government invested money into healthcare rather than supporting young families, which led to one in five children living in poverty at that time, while elderly were receiving free medical care. This might be one of the reasons why people of Generation X tend not to trust the authorities, whether it is the Church, state, school system, or a big corporation.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, these organizations are obviously not willing to trust them either, with marketers completely overlooking the Generation X in many cases, even though its members are in their 40s and 50s now and have substantial capital. It is not easy to categorize Xers and marketers are very well aware of that, which makes them focus rather on the more highly profiled generations, the Boomers and the Millennials, once again leaving the Xers in the middle.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1990s, people of Generation X were influenced by culture wars in the USA. According to the Open Education Sociology Dictionary, a culture war is a “Conflict, especially political, over cultural values, particularly in the United States.”<sup>10</sup> A certain division that polarizes the society has been present in the USA since the time of the Civil War, and to a certain degree, it is still present in the modern era. The electoral system itself polarizes the society, people can be either Democrats or Liberals, nothing in between. Both of those parties represent different cultural values of different groups of citizens. This division, combined with the need to define the core values of the USA for the next century escalated into what is nowadays known as a Culture war. The main values discussed during this period were abortion, federal and state gun laws, global warming and immigration, all

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<sup>8</sup> “Who is Generation X? The Story of a Lost Generation.”

<sup>9</sup> Robert Klara, “5 Reasons Marketers Have Largely Overlooked Generation X,” *ADWEEK*, April 4, 2016, accessed April 1, 2017, <http://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/5-reasons-marketers-have-largely-overlooked-generation-x-170539/>.

<sup>10</sup> “Culture war,” Open Education Sociology Dictionary, accessed April 1, 2017, <http://sociologydictionary.org/culture-war/>.

of which played a big part in the 2016 presidential votes and proved that the legacy of the Culture war was still present, leaving these topics to further discussions without a greater consensus.

Living in such turbulent times and having their parents often not present, Gen Xers had to learn how to become self-reliant, which is one of their key attributes. They struggled with finding a job after college but excelled at self-managing, which led them to entrepreneurial approach, with many of them establishing new companies.<sup>11</sup> And to the Boomers' great surprise, they have become quite capable. Since the Xers do not trust big companies and the balance between work life and family life is one of their top priorities, having their own business seems the best solution for them. There are many major leaders from the business sphere amongst them, to mention at least some: Elon Musk, the co-founder of PayPal and Tesla, founder of SpaceX and a great visionary with plans aiming even beyond our planet; Jack Dorsey, the youngest of the Twitter founders; Michael Dell, the founder of Dell, one of the world's biggest computer company.

All of these so-called slackers are now running multibillion dollar companies that are changing the world around us for the better. Generation X was a generation that laid the groundwork for the Millennials and it was them who stood behind the high-tech industry revolution. They practically created a world to which the Millennials, Generation Z and Generation A were and are born, a world of smartphones, virtual reality, social media, and nonstop internet connection at our hands. Google, Youtube and Amazon are also their babies which Millennials now perceive as something they almost cannot live without.<sup>12</sup>

As employees, Gen Xers are usually described as hard working and flexible. They are very self-reliant, therefore they hate to be micromanaged and as mentioned above, they do not like authority, not even at the workplace. This might create tensions, especially with the older generation. People from Generation X are slowly replacing the Boomers in the top positions in companies, working their way from the middle management to high management, they are becoming the CEOs, CFOs and COOs.

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<sup>11</sup> "Who is Generation X? The Story of a Lost Generation."

<sup>12</sup> M. J. Stephey, "Gen-X: The Ignored Generation?" *TIME MAGAZINE*, April 16, 2008, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1731528,00.html>.

Generally, the Xers stand right in the middle between the Boomers and the Millennials, incorporating the best of both groups. They share some values, such as hard work, with their parents, but are more open to the cultural, racial, religious and sexual diversity of their society just like their children. According to the Pew Research Center, 55% of Xers favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry, compared with 68% of Millennials and 48% of Boomers, placing them again in the middle, as a kind of a bridge between conservative and progressive values.<sup>13</sup> People of Generation X are much better at technological skills compared to the Boomers, despite not growing up with cellphones like the Millennials. Social media are quite a familiar territory to them, 24% of Xers have shared their selfies on social media and those who use Facebook have on average 200 friends.<sup>14</sup>

To sum it up, despite being called the Latchkey Generation, the Friends Generation, the MTV Generation or Slackers by their Boomer parents, they proved them completely wrong. They are maybe not so unique, kind of stuck in the middle, but an overall hard-working, entrepreneurial and modern generation of people well-equipped with skills so important for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After all, it was the Generation X that were the heroes of 9/11, they helped to save many lives and rebuild American patriotism.

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<sup>13</sup> "Generation X: America's neglected middle child," last modified June 5, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/05/generation-x-americas-neglected-middle-child/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## 2 CHUCK PALAHNIUK, GENERATION X LITERARY AUTHOR

Charles Michael Palahniuk, better known as Chuck Palahniuk, was born on February 21, 1962, in Pasco, Washington, which makes him an early member of Generation X. After the divorce of his parents when he was 14, he and his siblings were often sent to stay with their maternal grandparents on a cattle ranch in Washington. He graduated from Columbia High School in Burbank in 1980, and according to Palahniuk, it was a teacher of his, Mr. Olson, who sparked his passion for writing.<sup>15 16</sup>

Chuck Palahniuk attended the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication, from which he graduated in 1986. He wanted to make his living by writing, which led him to Portland, Oregon, where he worked for a local newspaper, *The Oregonian*. He did not stay there for long, as he soon switched to quite a different job. He became a diesel mechanic in the Freightliner Trucks Company, where he repaired trucks and wrote technical manuals. During that time, he became a member of the notorious Cacophony Society, which will be examined in more detail later, and also volunteered in a hospice and in a shelter for terminally ill patients. He had no medical knowledge whatsoever, so they offered him that he could accompany patients to support group meetings. He quit after the death of a patient to whom he had grown close.<sup>17</sup>

In his mid-30s, Chuck Palahniuk started to take writing more seriously. He attended workshops for writers. At the first one he was told that his stories were getting too dark. His fellow writers, mostly older ladies who were shocked by his work, said that they would prefer him to find another group. He was specifically recommended to attend a workshop of Tom Spanbauer, a well-known minimalist who had a great influence on Palahniuk's writing.<sup>18</sup>

*If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home Already* was Palahniuk's first attempt at novel writing, but publishers were not interested in his piece. However, he persisted and began working on his next novel, today known as *Invisible Monsters*, but even this novel was

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<sup>15</sup> "Strange But True: A Short Biography of Chuck Palahniuk," Chuck Palahniuk, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://chuckpalahniuk.net/author/strange-but-true-a-short-biography-of-chuck-palahniuk>.

<sup>16</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions About Chuck Palahniuk," Chuck Palahniuk, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://chuckpalahniuk.net/author/frequently-asked-questions-about-chuck-palahniuk>.

<sup>17</sup> "Chuck Palahniuk," Famous Authors, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://www.famousauthors.org/chuck-palahniuk>.

<sup>18</sup> "Strange But True: A Short Biography of Chuck Palahniuk."



rejected as being far too dark. This made Chuck furious and he decided to write a novel that would be the exact opposite of mainstream literature. He was willing to fight against the odds and create a novel that would be completely unpublishable.

And he did, he wrote a supposedly unpublishable novel titled *Fight Club*. This revolutionary, anarchistic and extremely dark story was surprisingly accepted and published in 1996. It even won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award as well as the Oregon Book Award for the Best Novel in 1997.<sup>19</sup> Initially, it was not a big hit. However, a few years later, hundreds of people came to readings of his novels with several even fainting.<sup>20</sup>

But some people saw the potential of *Fight Club*. One of them was David Fincher, who wanted to buy the movie rights, however, the company 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox bought them first and appointed Fincher the director. Edward Norton was cast as the unnamed protagonist, Brad Pitt as the alter-ego of Tyler Durden and Helena Bonham Carter as Marla Singer. The movie turned out really well and although it was not a box office hit, it gained a cult status after being released on DVD. The movie follows the same storyline as the book, the only major difference is the ending. The premiere of the movie had to be postponed because of the Columbine High School incident which created tension in the society, and it wasn't until October 15, 1999 that the movie eventually premiered.<sup>21</sup> Chuck Palahniuk did not work on the film adaptation but later stated that he loved it and found some connections in the plot really clever in many ways, wishing he had come up with them himself.<sup>22</sup>

1999 was probably one of the toughest years for Palahniuk. On the one hand, there was this newfound fame, as people started buying *Fight Club* by the dozen. On the other hand, there were tragic incidents in his family. Palahniuk's father had had a rough childhood and witnessed his own father kill his mother, the father subsequently committing suicide. Later, Palahniuk's father himself was killed along with his girlfriend by her jealous

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<sup>19</sup> "Chuck Palahniuk."

<sup>20</sup> Sean O'Hagan, "Fright club," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2005, accessed April 6, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/may/08/fiction.chuckpalahniuk>.

<sup>21</sup> Dennis Lim, "Fight Club' Fight Goes On," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2009, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/08/movies/homevideo/08lim.html>.

<sup>22</sup> "Chuck Palahniuk - Author of Fight Club," accessed May 9, 2017, [http://www.dvdtalk.com/interviews/chuck\\_palahniuk.html](http://www.dvdtalk.com/interviews/chuck_palahniuk.html).

ex-boyfriend. When Chuck was on his way home from the crime scene, he felt like it was too much for him, suddenly becoming famous and having his father killed. He got out of his car and lay on the road, hoping someone would find him, hug him and tell him that everything was going to be alright again. No one came. Then he got this idea about someone who would choke on purpose in restaurants in order to be hugged and cared about. He got off the road and drove home, where he started to work on his next novel called *Choke*.<sup>23</sup>

As Chuck's fan base grew almost overnight, he suddenly became a very popular author. The same year the *Fight Club* movie was released, he put out two other novels. The first one was *Survivor*, a rough criticism of American society and culture, in some ways even more provocative than *Fight Club*, but it was no problem for Palahniuk's fans. And the second one was the book he offered to the publishers first, *Invisible Monsters*, or more precisely, its revised version.

Thenceforward, he continued to publish approximately one book per year. He has written 15 fictional books, 14 short fictions and 3 non-fiction books. Yet in spite of claiming that his new material is much better, he remains to be most famous for *Fight Club*, his first book. He has also experimented with a comic book format, so *Fight Club 2* is a comic. As Palahniuk has stated, books have become old-fashioned style medium for older ladies who read just for pleasure. He thinks that progressive and provocative ideas, his favorite ones, are discussed in modern media, such as through video games, comic books or in popular TV series. These are largely consumed by an audience of young men, which is also the reason why he decided to publish the sequel to *Fight Club* in a comic book format. He seems to be excited with this media, since he has stated that another sequel of *Fight Club* in comic book format is already in working.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.1 Personal life and writing style

Judging solely by the contents of his books, Palahniuk might seem like a psychopath, a revolutionist, or at least extremely rude, but the opposite is true. When talking to

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<sup>23</sup> "Chuck Palahniuk: The Monsters Within (07/16/2012)." Youtube video, 32:00, posted by "Commonwealth Club," April 25, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKD\\_KrTr1qu](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKD_KrTr1qu).

<sup>24</sup> "Chuck Palahniuk: Mladá generace zkameněla, je plná starých lidí," last modified October 10, 2016, [http://www.rozhlas.cz/radiowave/kultura/\\_zprava/chuck-palahniuk-mlada-generace-zkamenela-je-plna-starych-lidi--1658203](http://www.rozhlas.cz/radiowave/kultura/_zprava/chuck-palahniuk-mlada-generace-zkamenela-je-plna-starych-lidi--1658203).

interviewers or fans, he is always polite and kind, almost radiating an aura of calmness. He usually dresses sharply, sometimes rather eccentrically. For example, once he came to an interview in his pajamas.<sup>25</sup> He still likes doing unexpected things, which is something he has retained from his Cacophony Society days.

As written on their website: “The Cacophony Society is a randomly gathered network of individuals united in the pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society through subversion, pranks, art, fringe explorations and meaningless madness.”<sup>26</sup> The Cacophony Society (CS) is also crucial to understand Chuck Palahniuk, to understand what has formed him and also of what his sense of humor is like.

According to Palahniuk, most members of the CS are people with boring jobs who need some excitement in their lives and the CS is their way to achieve it.<sup>27</sup> The main premise of the CS is to create an organized chaos. They set strict rules for all their activities and happenings, plan everything to the smallest detail and then unleash their plan upon the world. Their events usually include costumes and bizarre or funny activities. There are several chapters of the CS in the USA. An important part of the CS is flattening social hierarchy, making all members equal regardless of their jobs, social status or their personal history.

The Cacophony Society plays an important role in understanding *Fight Club* too, because it was this society that served as the prototype for *Fight Club*'s Project Mayhem, as there are many parallels among them.<sup>28</sup> One of Chuck Palahniuk's favorite methods is actually incorporating real life experiences and stories into his work. He has admitted before that he sometimes engages in social interactions for the purpose of getting new ideas for his stories. He tells an amusing or funny story and waits for other people to come up with stories they have heard or experienced themselves.<sup>29</sup> Palahniuk's journalist profession has influenced him, too. He is known for extensive research and for studying all the details, such as when writing the recipes for *Fight Club*. The recipes for TNT and soap he used

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<sup>25</sup> “Chuck Palahniuk on George Stroumboulopoulos Tonight: Interview.” Youtube video, 1:25, posted by “Strombo,” November 1, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paUx1AG-JTk>.

<sup>26</sup> “You may already be a member!” accessed March 25, 2017, <http://www.cacophony.org/sample-page/>.

<sup>27</sup> “Chuck Palahniuk: The Monsters Within (07/16/2012).” Youtube video, 28:00.

<sup>28</sup> “Chuck Palahniuk Gives a Lesson on Prank-ology,” last modified May 29, 2015, <http://www.dinnerpartydownload.org/chuck-palahniuk/>.

<sup>29</sup> “Chuck Palahniuk: The Monsters Within (07/16/2012).” Youtube video, 1:14:20.

were real, but in the published version one ingredient was changed to prevent the readers creating their own homemade TNT.<sup>30</sup>

He likes to incorporate things that people can relate to into his work. The idea to write *Fight Club* came from many conversations with his friends on the topic of modern American masculinity, defined only by buying new things, such as cars, houses or washer dryers, and also about the lack of rituals initiating boys into adulthood, combined with a lack of strong role models for young men. Many other ideas in *Fight Club* are based on his own experience, he worked at many jobs he depicted in his book, for example, he was a movie projectionist, bicycle messenger and a dishwasher, and he has suffered from insomnia too, same as the main protagonist of *Fight Club*.

Palahniuk used to be in contact with his fans, who would send him a lot of mail and he would read everything and sometimes even reply, but then he grew tired of this and instead of letters he began sending his fans random stuff. One of the letters he received was a letter from the Czech theatre *Divadlo v Celetné*, in which he was asked if they could turn his novel *Fight Club* into a play. He agreed and sent them some random stuff, too.<sup>31</sup>

His playful nature, so obvious because of his participation in the Cacophony Society, also manifests in his fondness of giving out various things to people, such as the time when he gave out several dozen of plush tigers to his fans during one interview.<sup>32</sup> He does not think of his novels as depressing, but describes them rather as romantic comedies, which many of his readers might find quite surprising.<sup>33</sup> Understanding his sense of humor is probably the key to fully appreciate the humor in his novels.

Although he has been a professional writer for more than two decades, he continues to be a member of a writers club that takes place every week. And all the writers present what they wrote in the previous week. These meetings help him to stay focused and consistent in his writing, the writers share their experiences and he also receives feedback on his work.

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<sup>30</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions About Chuck Palahniuk."

<sup>31</sup> "Palahniuk: Uvolnit svou temnou stránku může být terapeutické," last modified October 10, 2016, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/kultura/1934194-palahniuk-uvolnit-svou-temnou-stranku-muze-byt-terapeuticke>.

<sup>32</sup> "Chuck Palahniuk: The Monsters Within (07/16/2012)." Youtube video, 1:05:25.

<sup>33</sup> Tamara Straus, "The Unexpected Romantic: An Interview with Chuck Palahniuk," *Alternet*, June 18, 2001, accessed April 4, 2017, [http://www.alternet.org/story/11049/the\\_unexpected\\_romantic%3A\\_an\\_interview\\_with\\_chuck\\_palahniuk](http://www.alternet.org/story/11049/the_unexpected_romantic%3A_an_interview_with_chuck_palahniuk).

He writes everywhere he can, but only if he gets an exciting idea.<sup>34</sup> He does not favor pushing himself at all costs to write something for its sake. According to him, writing without inspiration is like sitting on a toilet without a reason.<sup>35</sup>

As was previously mentioned, Palahniuk's mentor, Tom Spanbauer, has had a great influence on his writing, both on his motifs and style. The influence on Palahniuk's writing style is evident right in his first published novel *Fight Club*, which is written in an almost movie-like approach, with minimalist structure focusing only on important parts of the plot, leaving everything unnecessary out. Authors like Amy Hempel, Mark Richards and Thom Jones are cited as his literary influences, together with E. A. Poe and F. S. Fitzgerald.<sup>36</sup>

### 2.1.1 Transgressive Fiction

Because Chuck Palahniuk tends to portray the darker side of the human psyche, society and life, there is no better genre to do this than Transgressive Fiction (TF). TF is characteristic for its portrayal of controversial, even shocking parts of human life, focusing on topics like sex, drugs abuse, violence, and crime. All of these topics were previously tabooed in literature, which made them highly controversial. TF is the voice of counterculture, it attacks mainstream society and everything the society represents, be it social hierarchy, consumerism or discrimination of minorities. The target audience of this genre are young adults, usually of liberal world view.<sup>37</sup>

The origins of modern TF can be traced back to the late 1950s in the USA and the Beat Generation. The Beat Generation was a generation of literary authors who wrote what was on their mind, what they felt and experienced, no matter how explicit and shocking it would have been to the general public. The authors of TF were no strangers to alcohol, drugs, promiscuous behavior and they loved jazz music. Some great examples of TF works are Ginsberg's *Howl* and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, both very provocative pieces of literature.

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<sup>34</sup> "Chuck Palahniuk: The Monsters Within (07/16/2012)." Youtube video, 19:44.

<sup>35</sup> "Postcards from the Future: The Chuck Palahniuk Documentary." Youtube video, 39:20, posted by "Mr. Blueberry," February 3, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1IH54MLTq4>.

<sup>36</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions About Chuck Palahniuk."

<sup>37</sup> "Transgressive fiction," Art & Popular Culture, accessed April 8, 2017, [http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Transgressional\\_fiction](http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Transgressional_fiction).

In the 1970s and 1980s TF was still perceived as an underground genre, but there were works written in this period which still managed to influence the mainstream culture, also known as the pop-culture. Charles Bukowski published many of his controversial books and poems and Anthony Burgess published his novel *Clockwork Orange* in 1962, which was adapted in 1971 into a movie by one of the best movie directors ever to live, Stanley Kubrick. The movie has become a classic and is controversial for its portrayal of drug abuse and ultra-violence in a futuristic society.

The 1990s were the so-called golden era of TF. Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* perfectly summed up the feelings of one generation, which got its name from this book and nowadays is known as Generation X. In 1991, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* was published and in 1993 Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*. Both of these novels were adapted to movies, both portraying the dark side of humanity, violence in the first case and drug abuse in the second one.<sup>38</sup>

As Chuck Palahniuk has stated, *Fight Club* has continued in this ongoing tradition of Transgressive Fiction in American literature with anti-mainstream ideas, criticism of consumerism and materialistic values combined with the portrayal of raw violence. Although the genre of most Palahniuk's novels can be considered Transgressive Fiction, according to him, TF died with 9/11. Any kind of terrorism, eco-terrorism or even pranking was not to be tolerated by a society recovering from nationwide trauma. Palahniuk has said himself, there were books already written that could not be published due to their content.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> James Gardner, "Transgressive fiction," *National Review* (1996): 56.

<sup>39</sup> "Postcards from the Future: The Chuck Palahniuk Documentary." Youtube video, 18:10.

### 3 THE ORIGINS OF FRUSTRATION OF THE MODERN MAN AND THE CRISIS OF MASCULINITY

Over the past three decades, there have been many studies done and dozens of books written on the subject of the crisis of modern-era masculinity. Our society has changed so much in the last century with two world wars changing the geopolitical and social situation of the whole world and dividing it into two implacable opponents, the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc. Generation X grew up in the USA in the era of the Cold War, mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, when it was newly acceptable for couples to get divorced and to pursue their own happiness. But no one asked about the happiness of their children, young boys in this case. Many of them grew up without fathers, some did not even know them and some fathers were not present because of their work, their hobbies, or the fact that they just did not know how to be fathers.

#### 3.1 Absent fathers

As said by Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*: “What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women.”<sup>40</sup> This was exactly the problem, Generation X men were quite probably the first modern generation of men that grew up fatherless. This non-presence of fathers had two reasons. The first reason is obvious, many young males grew up not even knowing who their father was. They had never seen him, never talked to him and they did not know how he looked, what he was like. Hence, the boys did not know where they came from, who their grandparents were and who their relatives from the father’s side were. They most likely knew their family from their mother’s side, but men tend to identify more with their father’s part of family. Because their father was a male, they inherited his surname and tended to see him as a role model for all parts of their lives and entering their manhood with his help in the course of time.<sup>41</sup>

Absence of fathers leads to two things. Young males hate them and glorify them at the same time.<sup>42</sup> They hate them for leaving because they feel like they were not good enough, or worse, the fathers never even wanted to create them, which makes their sons feel like an unwanted burden. Chuck Palahniuk compared these missing fathers to God, which made

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<sup>40</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Guy Corneau, *Chybějící otec, chybuující syn* (Prague: Portál, 2012), 21.

<sup>42</sup> Corneau, *Chybějící otec, chybuující syn*, 27.

young men feel like God had abandoned them too.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, they glorify their fathers as this invisible entity that has influenced their lives in the biggest way possible by creating them, but they are not able to reach out to them by any means.

But the absence of fathers does not have to be only metaphorical. A father that lives with his family but does not spend any time with his child is completely absent, same as a father that leaves his family.<sup>44</sup> As girls tend to copy the behavior of their mothers, boys do the same thing with their fathers. Fathers usually spend more time with boys as they grow older, they do not take much interest in infants and toddlers.

In the past, being a good father meant providing a family with resources, such as food, clothes and some place to live, in modern era with education, too. The influence of fathers is, of course, vital for young girls too, but it is way more important for young boys. Girls can always search for their role model in their mothers, but boys really do need a masculine role model, their father, to show them how to behave as a man, how to cope with emotions, especially sadness and anger. Vast majority of imprisoned people are men, and this inability to cope with a vicious circle of stress, depression and anger might be a dangerous mixture behind all of this.<sup>45</sup>

With the industrial revolution, a new phenomenon occurred. Fathers began leaving their households to make a living, which had not been a usual concept until then. Previously, fathers would spend a lot of their time at home, whether they were craftsmen or farmers. A son usually helped around when he was old enough and he was expected to take over his father's livelihood after him. It was inevitable that they would spend a lot of time together, the father showing the secrets of his craft to his son. Fathers and sons could bond together and the sons could see what their fathers were good at that and what they were like.<sup>46</sup>

After the industrial revolution, a father would leave home to make a living, often for many hours, and come home tired from his work. He did not have that much time to spend

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<sup>43</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 140-141.

<sup>44</sup> Elisabeth Badinter, *XY: O mužské identitě* (Prague: Paseka, 2005), 143.

<sup>45</sup> Jessica Abrahams, "Are men natural born criminals? These prison numbers don't lie," *The Telegraph*, January 13, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11342408/Are-men-natural-born-criminals-Prison-numbers-dont-lie.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Stanislav Komárek, *Muž jako evoluční inovace?: eseje o maskulinitě, její etologii, životních strategiích a proměnách* (Prague: Academia, 2012), 219.



with his family, and all that the son saw was a father who does not spend time with his family and does not show his son what he is good at. This present but at the same time absent father is a rather modern day phenomenon, and is often described as despicable and unworthy by his son. But on the other hand, it was the father who kept the family fed.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore not surprisingly, young boys felt a strong need for a masculine role model, this archetype of a “Manly Man” who would be encoded in their consciousness, and they found it in culture.<sup>48</sup> Comic books are a great example of that, focusing on superheroes like Batman, Superman and Iron Man. It is often said that superheroes that are most loved by fans who are predominantly young and teenage boys have the word man in their name. In most cases, these superheroes are exactly what the young boys are looking for. They are physically strong and mentally sharp, quite similar to the mythical heroes from the old Anglo-Saxon myths, namely Beowulf, characterizing the best of men, the very archetype of a hero.<sup>49</sup>

Popular movie heroes are also often portrayed as the prototypical hero-warriors, for example *Rambo*, *Rocky*, *Terminator*, and many others.<sup>50 51</sup> Tough guys who do not talk much and rather use their fists as a method of communication are problematic, since they are basically walking examples of hypermasculinity. They are the embodiments of a prototypical man who use their masculine side to solve everything and usually do not show any emotions other than anger and rage. This is exactly the old-fashioned type of man, who is incompatible with a modern society, although a lot of men still see this prototype as the correct one. Sadly, men tend to commit murder, an act of outer violence, or commit suicide, an act of violence on themselves, much more often than women.<sup>52</sup>

The presence of men is not only important for young boys and teenagers. Even middle-aged men need men older than they are in their lives to help them cope with difficult life situations, to mentor them and to share their experiences. In the past, it was common that men would spend a lot of time together, boys used to spend time with their grandfathers

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<sup>47</sup> Steve Biddulph, *Mužství: Jak zvládat všechny mužské role* (Prague: Portál, 2007), 13.

<sup>48</sup> Corneau, *Chybějící otec, chybní syn*, 35-36.

<sup>49</sup> See Ibid, 36-37.

<sup>50</sup> David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 19.

<sup>51</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 202.

<sup>52</sup> Komárek, *Muž jako evoluční inovace*, 42.

and their uncles or other men of the tribe, who were able to show them masculinity from a different point of view than their father did. It had a positive influence on their adolescence and maturity. Sadly, in a modern, post-industrial society, such thing is no longer common. This results in many pathological phenomena, mainly amongst adolescent boys who suffer from the lack of masculine presence, authority and more importantly acceptance, advice and love, too.<sup>53</sup>

### 3.2 Absence of initiating rituals

The key aspect of masculinity is that it has to be created or somehow obtained, in an ideal situation by learning from the father and by undergoing initiating rituals. These rituals are still a common feature of life in many tribes, even today. The problem of modern cultures and societies is that this phenomenon has gone completely missing from them. There seems to be this need of young boys to pass from children to men. In contrast with young females, who were traditionally considered as women with their first period, there is no physical change that would make boys feel like they are finally men. This leads to their need of having their masculine nature indisputably confirmed by some other means and this is the reason why rites of passage are so important.<sup>54 55</sup>

It is a common thing to tell young boys phrases that appeal to them not to be feminine, such as “don’t be a girl,” “boys don’t cry,” or “be a man.” Their basic premise is that one must be a man, you cannot be a girl. Boys are to define themselves as the opposite polarity of femininity, whatever it may mean in the given culture.<sup>56</sup> It is almost as if young boys would not perceptibly distance themselves from femininity. No matter what they are like, they would be considered feminine and not masculine enough.

So it only makes sense that in the past, indigenous tribes that were more in touch with nature sensed this urgent need of young males to be acknowledged as men when the time came. They used to create some much elaborated rituals, which often resembled religious ceremonies and were treated as very special occasions in the life of the tribe. Thanks to

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<sup>53</sup> Biddulph, *Mužství*, 33.

<sup>54</sup> Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making*, 106.

<sup>55</sup> Corneau, *Chybějící otec, chybní syn*, 149.

<sup>56</sup> Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making*, 10

them it was clear when boys became men, as after undergoing the ritual, the boys were treated as such.<sup>57</sup>

From the modern point of view, these rituals might seem quite shocking today, considering that they are usually performed on boys aged between 8 and 12 years, depending on the culture. Their purpose is clear, it was to help boys pass from a world of femininity and childhood into a world of masculinity, which were both extremely different in the past in contrast with a modern society. For men, it was common to fight, to kill and to suffer physically. Because of this, initiation to the cruel world of manhood was a harsh experience for young boys. After the ritual, the boys became part of the group of men in their tribe.<sup>58</sup>

Similar traditions are still present in some cultures in refined ways today. For some cultures, the key element of becoming a man is a time when boys undergo circumcision. They have to endure the pain, or even shame when the procedure is done in front of the whole village, and after that they are considered men in their community, but only if they take the pain silently.<sup>59</sup> The element of blood and pain seems to be especially important. In the past, a man was expected to be used to fighting, killing and enduring pain, and such procedures were definitely neither painless, nor bloodless. And since girls have a natural way of becoming women that also involves blood, its symbolism is obvious.

As drastic as these methods of initiation might seem, their complete absence in modern society has become a big problem. The vague transition into adulthood in Western cultures is often characterised by teenage boys rebelling against their parents and against the society, trying to establish themselves as individuals, yet unable to accomplish any results, since people are usually unable to live on their own in their 20s, mainly because of finances. Fathers should hear out the calling of their sons and help them during this period, they should show them different sides of masculinity rather than punish them for their behavior and teach them how to channel their aggression and anger into positive things, such as sports, arts, or whatever may suit them the best.

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<sup>57</sup> Biddulph, *Mužství*, 20-21.

<sup>58</sup> Badinter, *XY: O mužské identitě*, 73-77.

<sup>59</sup> Chip Brown, "The Many Ways Society Makes a Man," *National Geographic*, January, 2017, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/01/how-rites-of-passage-shape-masculinity-gender/>.

Nowadays, many men live with their parents as long as possible, some even into their 30s, because it is the easiest and cheapest way of living. But because of this, they do not experience any detachment from their mother, they are not able to live completely on their own, which keeps them in a state of a so-called eternal childhood. According to psychoanalytic therapists, to some men the lack of an event forming their personality means that they unconsciously harm themselves even in their 30s. They get injured somehow, crash their cars, or lose their jobs, all because of the unfulfilled need for a formative experience rooted in their subconsciousness, which they have not undergone.<sup>60</sup>

Closely related to this subject are also the Peter Pan Syndrome and the Little Prince Syndrome.<sup>61</sup> People with these syndromes tend to stay childish or child-like even when fully grown up. They tend to avoid responsibilities, cannot handle their emotions well and blame other people for things they themselves are responsible for. This is often caused by overprotective parents, usually the mothers who are not able to disconnect from their sons and let them live their own lives. None of this would happen if our society had at least some way of initiating boys into adulthood. In the past, compulsory military service was the closest thing that could serve as a passage into adulthood for men, but nowadays in most of the Western countries it is not common to go through this training. Some argue that graduation or getting a driver's license may serve as such, but the premise of a rite of passage is that it serves exclusively for young males to become adults. These modern equivalents are not relevant, since the females are able to undergo them too.

### 3.3 The pressures of the society and its changes

Masculinity, or rather masculinities, as is used in modern Sociology, is something that is not inherited and encoded in men's DNA. Masculinities depend on the specific culture, its traditions, behaviour, or conventions. This leads to the plural form being accepted as more appropriate. Even the overall meaning of this word has changed a lot over the centuries and past decades, depending on the sociological and historical context.<sup>62</sup>

Masculinity is often considered something that must be achieved, obtained, or acquired, it is not something that every male is born with. This belief seems to be

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<sup>60</sup> Corneau, *Chybějící otec, chybní syn*, 157-58.

<sup>61</sup> Badinter, *XY: O mužské identitě*, 78.

<sup>62</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 202.

prevailing in almost all cultures in the world.<sup>63</sup> Rites of passage are usually clear indicators of newly achieved manhood, but in a modern society, where these have almost completely vanished, the transition to a clear state of manhood seems to be replaced by different elements.

In Western cultures, the element that serves as the means of the transition is usually materialism. By gradually acquiring things, property and money, men gain their manhood in the course of life, and by displaying their wealth they show off their substitute masculinity.<sup>64</sup> The bigger their house is, the faster their car is, and the more stuffed their wallet is, the more virile they feel.<sup>65</sup> In tribal societies, this element is also present, boys usually have to prove themselves first, whether by killing an animal or enduring physical suffering. Then they are permitted to have family and considered men. The problem is that with masculinity completely transferred into objects, not every man is able to obtain such possessions to be proud of as other men, which often leads to anger.

To acquire things and properties, men need money, and to obtain sufficient amount of money, they need a job. The fear and anxieties of white American men connected with a possible loss of a job distinctly grew in the 1960s. There was a feminist movement wanting more equality for women so that they could spend less time at home and participate more in the public life, especially by going to work. Also, movements for the rights of African American men fought for greater employment for people of color. And white men were not very happy to see this, since for them it was an attack on jobs they thought belonged to them. If they would lose their jobs, they would be deprived of the ability to provide for their own families and to acquire possessions, which would emasculate them.<sup>66</sup>

Across different cultures, the characteristic properties of manliness and virility may differ to a certain degree, but there seem to be three common ones. The first one is to impregnate a woman, the second one is to protect, especially the mother and the offspring, and sometimes even the extended family, and the third one is to provide resources for the family to survive. These are the primary elements interculturally considered as the key

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<sup>63</sup> Badinter, *XY: O mužské identitě*, 34-35.

<sup>64</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 203-204.

<sup>65</sup> Douglas B. Holt and Craig J. Thompson, "Man-of-Action Heroes: How the American Ideology of Manhood Structures Men's Consumption," *Harvard Business School Marketing Research Papers* 03-04 (2002): 47, doi: 10.1086/422120.

<sup>66</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 173-174.

aspects of manhood. If a man is not able to secure these, or even one of them, his manhood is considered inferior.<sup>67</sup> The fear of losing a job is therefore deeply rooted in the subconsciousness of men and has probably been the reason for the anger towards immigrants in the past and in the present, too.

The mere desire to think more deeply about masculinity was induced by the rise of feminist movement. Masculinity and femininity are as opposite as Yin and Yang, and when one changes, the other one must change too. As women gained more rights, men felt like they had lost some, as if women had invaded men's sacred space and threatened them somehow.<sup>68</sup> Along with women, people of color and people of other sexual orientation, today known as LGBT, also slowly gained their rightful place in the world. But for the straight white middle-class American man, this felt almost like the end of the world. People who were oppressed in the past gained a voice and the position of a white male in the society crumbled for the very first time in history. Women could now work in more positions, they became more independent and men suddenly did not feel very important and needed. The portrayal of American manhood had to alter, since black men wanted to be fully recognized as true men, too.<sup>69</sup> This shock of position of men in a society seems to be quite important, since the discussion about manhood is still ongoing and may have become even more widespread over the last two decades.

The pressure on men to fulfil their role given to them by their society was for some men the reason to form movements for men's liberation. The ideal American man is of native origin, has a wife and children, owns a house, is tall, has many friends, has a good job, is athletic and does sports. The problem is that majority of men are not able to identify with this ideal, which led to the establishment of men's liberation movements in the 1970s. Some men were tired by the constant pressure to play the role of a proper American man who makes a lot of money, looks good, is successful, and does not feel a wide scale of emotions, since everybody knows that boys don't cry. In a society where the measure of success is money, these men wanted to regain their masculinity in other ways, for they were not happy with their lives and roles they felt pressured to be playing.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making*, 19.

<sup>68</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 180-181.

<sup>69</sup> See *Ibid*, 202.

<sup>70</sup> See *Ibid*, 185.

The fitness trend became a part of life for many men. The desire to look manly, which usually meant muscular, big, and buffed, became attractive. Many men suffered from the Adonis Complex, which is defined as “the belief that men must look like Greek gods, with perfect chins, thick hair, rippling muscles, and washboard abdominals.”<sup>71</sup> Movies like *Rocky*, *Rambo*, *Conan the Barbarian*, and many others displayed heroes who looked incredibly buff and were overly muscular.<sup>72</sup> For many men, these strong fighters without emotions defeating everything in their way represented the ideal of manhood.

Men have been afraid of women’s influence on young boys since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as women worked in schools, hospitals and churches.<sup>73</sup> This fear re-emerged in the last years, as school systems in Western societies have become more suitable for girls. Schoolchildren have to sit quietly at their desks, take notes and cannot interrupt the teacher. No physical activities are usually employed, which makes the school experience for young boys who are full of hormones boring and not interesting enough to care. Their aversion is often directed towards students who have good grades and are proactive, which makes them frequently a subject of bullying. The problem of schooling system being perceived as uncool by many boys becomes more and more apparent every year, as the number of male university students in most Western countries decreases annually. Studying not being manly enough an activity in their eyes might be one of the reasons they turn away from college education.<sup>74</sup>

Bullying in schools between boys is not a new phenomenon, but in modern times it has become a big problem. Some boys are picked on daily, called bad names and degraded in many ways by their schoolmates. Their manhood is questioned, they are mocked. And even when they are suffering, they do not always try to contact a responsible person, because by doing so they would. As their anger accumulates, they might turn to violence, whether against themselves or against other people. The Columbine High School massacre, which took place in 1999, is probably the most infamous incident of school shooting. Unfortunately, in America there are dozens of similar incidents reported every year. The vast majority of school shooters are young white males who were bullied by their

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<sup>71</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 180-181.

<sup>72</sup> See Ibid, 202.

<sup>73</sup> See Ibid, 105-106.

<sup>74</sup> See Ibid, 240-241.

schoolmates, same as the shooters from Columbine. Their manhood was questioned to the point that they were not able to act in any other way and had to resort to the most hypermasculine act that exists, to kill.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 242-45.



## **4 MANHOOD FOR THE NEW MILLENIUM**

As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, the crisis of masculinity and manhood is a real problem in many societies, including the American one. Men are not able to identify with their own masculinity and it is predominantly due to the absence of fathers, lack of modern versions of rites of passage and accelerating changes within the society. The role of a man has been destabilized, whether men want to admit it or not. Although this situation might seem like a dead end, there are actually possible suggestions and solutions how to change the status quo and create a new image of masculinity adjusted for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, from which the society as a whole would benefit, not only men but their wives and children too.

### **4.1 Change of masculinity as a benefit for the whole society**

The feminist movement in the 1960s achieved a great accomplishment, it started the much needed discussion about the role of women in the society. Women felt oppressed, unhappy with their role of the virtuous housewife who takes care of the children, cleans the household, cooks meals for the husband and stays at the home most of the time. This role made many women depressed, as they did not see any greater purpose in their lives. But things started to change and nowadays there is no fixed role strictly given by a society that women have to conform to. Women can do whatever they want with their lives without being identified as unfeminine.

What many authors of publications on the topic of a crisis of modern masculinity suggest is that men should get inspired and do the same women did, that is, try to reshape the old form of manhood into a new one, one suitable for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For a long time, men have been perceived as the ones who should be responsible for the livelihood of the family, as the ones who must protect the family and who must constantly prove their manliness in doing so. And whereas masculinity is a construct of a society, which may be acquired by doing something or acting somehow, it can be easily stripped away by not doing something, or by an individual not being able to prove something. This builds up constant pressure which leads to men being more prone to alcoholism, drug abuse, committing violent acts on others, often their own family, their wives and children, or on themselves. The root of this problem might very well lie in the society itself and its expectations of men. Men's inability to share their distress and anxieties with other men,

since doing so would make them look feminine and weak and real man do not want to be like this, creates a vicious circle that must be broken at all cost.<sup>76</sup>

#### 4.1.1 Men need to talk

The solution is surprisingly not that complicated. Men need to open up more and start talking about things that torment them, ideally with other men who would understand the inner pain and suffering, since they might have similar life experiences. Whether men have suffered bullying, abuse, humiliation, or had problems with their parents, other men are able to see it from their perspective, and most importantly, are able to understand and hear the others out.<sup>77</sup>

To share negative life experiences is a common thing between women but usually not between men. Men tend to talk only about positive things, things they have achieved, things they have bought and how much money they have made. Sharing fears with other men is seen as a weakness, as something rather emasculating. And as a man's pain accumulates in the course of his lifetime without sharing it, men tend to kill these inner demons by numbing them, most commonly with alcohol, in the worst case with a loaded gun.

Men groups are a good option for those who want to share their lives with other men. They are more and more popular in Western cultures, as many men feel the need to connect with others who might have gone through the same problems.<sup>78</sup> Men have emotions. Although many of them would deny it, they do, and modern masculinity needs to be aware of it. The old-fashioned ideal of a stoic emotionless man denies the true nature of men, who are emotional beings, just as women are. Denying their emotions has not led to anything good in the past and proved to be damaging. Modern masculinity should allow men to express their emotions and discuss them freely without being perceived by their society as lesser.

#### 4.1.2 Men need friends

Men in tribal societies would spend most of their time with other men. They would share the myths of their tribe, hunt together and learn from each other. They would share

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<sup>76</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 254-55.

<sup>77</sup> Corneau, *Chybějící otec, chybující syn*, 184.

<sup>78</sup> See Ibid, 178.

their experiences so that the younger ones could learn from their elders who in turn enjoyed their respect. In modern societies, men do not spend much time together, which leads to a lack of real role models for men. Real is the crucial world in the previous sentence, because the real role models, respectable men of the tribe and the elders, are replaced in modern societies by unreal role models, who usually display only one-sided portrait of masculinity, often even hypermasculinity, as can be seen in popular action movies.

The need to talk and share is sadly seen as a women-like quality, but men should at least try to embrace this side of masculinity, find friends amongst other men and share their life experiences with them, like men used to do thousands of years ago. Organizing activities with friends, or with sons, doing things together like men always did may seem as the best cure for the loneliness that many men suffer from but are afraid to display.

#### 4.1.3 Men need to return home

With the industrial revolution, men started working outside their households and women began to dominate in the area of homes, childcare, cooking and cleaning. Public areas were seen as places for men, households became the domain of women. This has led to men being alienated from their homes and families, making them almost visitor-like figures in their own homes, since the public space was their field.<sup>79</sup>

The presence of men is vital for the family as a whole. It has been proven that children benefit from the active participation of men in their upbringing. Sons need to be in the presence of fathers, they need to spend time with them, like boys used to in the past, to learn from them how a man should behave and how to integrate their masculine identities into their own. They need to learn how to be fathers from their own fathers. But none of this is possible if the father becomes almost a stranger to his family, spending less and less time with his family, as is the trend in modern times.<sup>80</sup>

Men need to come back home. Their presence is crucial for the well-being of the whole family. Wives need help with the children and the households, otherwise they get stressed and unhappy, often angry with the husbands, who flee to the public areas which they perceive as their own, rather than their homes. This could be done only if modern masculinity embraces new standards. Taking care of children must not be considered as a

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<sup>79</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 256.

<sup>80</sup> Badinter, *XY: O mužské identitě*, 160.

completely womanly thing, men need to stand up to their responsibilities, which children and households definitely are, and find the manliness and joy in participating in everyday family activities.

#### 4.1.4 Men need to do sports

In the post-industrial society, a lot of men work in jobs that require sitting in front of a computer screen and not moving enough. Sports are the best way to exercise the body, but even more importantly, collective sports enable men to enjoy almost tribe-like behavior, at least for a short period of time, as there are many similar aspects between team sports and tribal behavior. The coach is the one who is the eldest of them all and shares his knowledge and experiences with the younger ones. Players have to train to improve their skills and fitness, almost as if they were preparing for a battle. And the match is like a battle or a hunt in itself, every scored goal causes great happiness for the whole group since everybody has participated in the collective effort. It is an experience similar to what in the past was the killing of some wild animal or defeating a rival tribe.<sup>81 82</sup>

Even fans who do not actively participate in the action on the pitch feel pride for their beloved team. They wear their team's colors, sing chants and literally breathe with the players in the field who represent the most talented individuals of their group. The need for collective effort with a promise of possible achievements is what draws millions of men around the planet to join in collective sports, be it football and hockey in Europe, or baseball and American football in America.

Many men are just fans of sport, but it is important for them to actively participate too and do some sports by themselves, instead of just consuming them through the media, which has become a man's favorite hobby over the past decades, either through the radio in the past, or by watching TV today. Collective sports are not the only exercise vital for men, martial arts are a great way to learn how to control oneself and how to channel aggression in a positive way. Especially the traditional Asian martial arts, which are deeply connected with Eastern philosophies, could be the best option for men who want to redirect their everyday stresses and anger into something positive. By combining the training of physical as well as mental elements, martial arts appear the ideal way for men to find their

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<sup>81</sup> Badinter, *XY: O mužské identitě*, 160.

<sup>82</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 246.

masculinity not in their possessions, as is usual nowadays, but in their own minds and bodies.

#### 4.1.5 Men need to change their values

American men could also try to find inspiration in the lifestyle of Native American tribes. These tribes used to live in peace with nature, respecting its laws and using it only for survival, not for exploitation, as is sadly common in the modern era of industrialism and post-industrialism. Their cultural values were, according to Donald M. Taylor, often the complete opposite of what is perceived as White Values.

In his book *The Quest for Identity*, he mentions group emphasis, cooperation, age, giving, modesty, silence, patience and harmony with nature amongst the typically Indian Values, as opposed to individual emphasis, competition, youth, saving, impatience and conquest of nature, which are the typical White Values. Learning more about the life of Native Americans and trying to incorporate at least some elements of these cultures into their everyday modern lives may prove itself to be a good option for men seeking their inner balance.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Donald M. Taylor, *The Quest for Identity: From Minority Groups to Generation Xers*, (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 63.

## 5 *FIGHT CLUB, OR HOW MEN HAD TO DO SOMETHING*

Chuck Palahniuk has captured an interesting part of time of modern history in his novel *Fight Club*. At the brink of the new millennium, many people felt like something important had to happen in order for societies to transfer to a new modern era of humankind. Almost every decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought some changes to societies and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was seen by many as the point of culmination of all these past events.

New technologies changed the essence of work and many men found themselves working for big international corporations, where the outcome of their work was neither tangible nor observable. Although they made sufficient amount of money and were able to acquire a lot of material goods, they were not happy with their lives, mainly because of the lack of higher purpose. Paradoxically, the more things they bought, the worst they felt. The more they owned the worst their state of mind was. And in 1997, Chuck Palahniuk introduced his idea how men could cope with this crisis in his novel *Fight Club*.

### 5.1 **Portrayal of the Generation X men in the novel *Fight Club***

Tyler Durden, the main protagonist of the novel *Fight Club*, is a typical man of Generation X. He is in his thirties, he works for a big corporation, has a nice flat equipped with the latest furniture from IKEA and owns several Calvin Klein shirts, but he is not happy with his life. All his life he was told what he should do and what his next right step should be, whether by his family or by the society. And when he finally did it and the decision what to do next was up to him, he felt lost.

Generation X men felt as if they were missing some greater purpose in their lives. There were no great wars that needed to be won. Families did not need their physical protection, men couldn't prove their masculinity by defeating enemies or by gaining glory in a battle. But there is a battle for them to fight, though not in the traditional meaning as a battle of two armies on a battlefield, but rather a spiritual battle. A battle in which men fight for their identity in our modern era. They do not fight against something, some dangerous enemy, but rather for something, specifically for their own identity in a world that went through great changes in the last century.

In the novel *Fight Club*, the need of some type of struggle for a higher purpose, what traditionally used to be fighting in a war for one's homeland, transformed into an excitement of men for their underground club created by men, for men. Like in the war, only men were allowed to participate, and like in the war, men fought against each other,

except for the fact that they did not kill each other. They created a community in which men felt again like men. They could win or lose, but both fighters were considered rightful members of this manly group and accepted as such. It represented a safe space for men, since over the last decades, women have infiltrated a great deal of spaces traditionally occupied by men, which was illustrated in the novel by the character of Marla, who visited the meetings of a testicular cancer patients group.

The fight club was a direct opposite to the testicular cancer therapy group, which the main protagonist went to. It was even said in the novel that all men from this group later joined the fight club, where they were able to transform their pain, anger or sadness into a fight, instead of crying, as was common at the therapy sessions. The fight club gave them an opportunity to feel like men again, even though their manliness, represented by their testicles, was in a danger.

One of the rules of the fight club was that who came there for the first time had to fight. This might have served as a rite of passage for the newcomers. The first fight was their entry among other men and after the fight, no matter who won, both fighters were accepted. Men living in a modern society are often discouraged from violence, as it is viewed as negative type of behavior and is strictly punished, whether by schools or by the state. But this idea of consensual violence, where both men agree with the fight, was described as something worthy of tolerating by the society.

The theme of the lack of purpose in the life of Generation X men seems to be recurring, since the fight club influences the lives of its members positively in many ways. As members, they had purposeful motivation to work out. They needed to be fit to fight in order to win, not to gain muscles just for showing off as many men nowadays do. They also needed to keep their hair cut and their nails short, and again, it was because of the fights.

It almost seems like these men needed to undergo some type of training. The fight club had strict rules that all members were supposed to follow. Project Mayhem, which was an organization created by Tyler Durden and whose members were recruited solely from the fight club, continued in the order established by the fight club, but its rules were more stringent, almost military-like. Their workday was planned to the smallest detail, they all knew what their tasks were and they had a strong leader whom they trusted, Tyler Durden.

Chuck Palahniuk probably wanted to point out that men needed a strong leader who would know what he was doing and had a clear vision that he wanted to achieve. If the leader's vision was interesting enough for other men, they were able to work the hardest

they could to achieve it. But in modern societies, where people in leading positions are not always these types of leaders, men do not feel motivated enough. Tyler Durden did not respect his boss because he did not prove to Tyler that he was worth it. And as a typical member of Generation X, Tyler hated to be managed and told what to do by someone whom he did not respect as a natural leader.

Tyler's relationship with the company that he worked for was not very positive either. Since Xers do not trust big corporations, Tyler was no different. Knowing all the bad things the company did, he threatened to go public with this crucial information, using the company as a source of passive income in order to stay quiet about certain things. Xers were also focused on seeking a balance of their work and private life. Although it was not a standard reaction, Tyler found his inner balance and pleasure in the fight club and since many other men joined him, the demand for this type of a club must have been high amongst the men of his age group.

Tyler Durden was also a father-like figure for the members, as he even told them that they were "a generation of men raised by women." As was mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, many boys grow up only with their mother, without the presence of any significant male role model. Tyler taught them discipline, rules, how to fight and how to survive on their own, which was something that a lot of them had not experienced while growing up. He provided them with the initiating ritual into their adulthoods, which was the first fight in the fight club, and he stayed there for them, which was something their own fathers did not like. Thanks to this, it is no surprise that they were ready to die and kill for him as part of Project Mayhem. Like the members of the Cacophony Society, which served as an inspiration for Project Mayhem, its members were bored and tired by their everyday life of unfulfilling jobs at offices and when Tyler offered them something to fight for, whether it was their virility or liberation from the mainstream society, they happily accepted.

Even Tyler Durden himself had a well-paid job and led a decent life. But the material excess that came with his well-paid job was paradoxically the root of the problem. "Things you use to own, now they own you"<sup>84</sup> is a perfect definition of what bothered these men. Again, the words of Tyler Durden perfectly described one of the reasons why all these men

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<sup>84</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 44.



were so angry that they felt the need to punch each other in the face. As sad as it is, a society often judges people by their jobs and by what they own. More specifically, their manhood was transferred onto these materialistic possessions and their work position. Tyler Durden offered them redemption. Finally, for the first time in their lives, these men were told what they wanted to hear all their lives. It was that every man could be accepted as such, no matter where he worked or what car he drove. Tyler showed them that manhood came from the inside and not from the outside, as has become common in modern societies. It is obvious how important it was for them to hear this, since they were all ready to sacrifice their lives for his cause in return.

## CONCLUSION

Generation X did not have an easy upbringing. Its children grew up in turbulent times when a lot of things in their society changed rapidly. More people got divorced than ever, feminism was on the rise and the Hippie movement fought against the traditional values. These changes had a great influence on the Generation X, because their parents were not bound by the strict rules of their society anymore and lived their lives more freely than most generations ever before. The parents of Generation X, the so-called Baby Boomers, often underestimated the generation of their kids, calling them the Latchkey Generation, MTV Generation or Slackers. But nowadays it is obvious that they did not deserve any of these nicknames.

Generation X is known as a generation of hardworking people. It was them who stood behind the fast progress of computing technologies in the 1990s. They also proved to be a generation of people with a great enthusiasm for entrepreneurship. In spite of the fact that they do not like to be micro-managed and told what to do, they can work hard. Therefore establishing their own businesses seemed a logical option for them. To mention some, Elon Musk and Michael Dell are both men of Generation X who are business leaders creating tomorrow's world for generations to come.

The literary author, Chuck Palahniuk, represents a voice of many men of this generation. In his best-selling novel *Fight Club* he perfectly described the situation of millions of American men. Although a lot of them had good jobs in big corporations, they were not happy with their lives. Consumerism was not an answer to their questions and buying more things was not the way to go for them.

Surprisingly enough, organized punching each other in the face, which was an idea introduced in the novel *Fight Club*, seemed like a good solution for their problems. Simply said, in modern societies men are not able to vent out their frustrations in any aggressive way, since it is viewed as objectionable behavior. The consensual violence between the men who are members of their own group, led by a strong leader Tyler Durden, gave them the desired answers to their questions.

There were several reasons for their frustration, but the most crucial ones could be identified as the absence of fathers, the absence of rites of passage in modern American society, and the pressures of the society on men, especially the growing expectations of their financial and material achievements. A lot of men of Generation X felt pressured into

the stereotypical role of the ideal American man, which resulted in their need for some drastic change in their lives, as was presented in the novel *Fight Club*.

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