A Conjunctural Cultural Studies Approach to the Millennial

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Around 2013, the term 'Millennial' to describe a new generation became the most widely used generational word on the English-speaking internet. By 2018 it was appearing online more than two and a half times as frequently as 'Baby Boomer'.

By looking at big data corpuses of online language use through the software Sketch Engine (see Figure 5.1), we can see how generational terms enter widespread usage and the rise and fall in their use over time.[1] From 2008 the use of the term 'Gen X' remains steady and 'Baby Boomer' starts to decline after 2013.

In this chapter, we trace some of the different discourses that centre the Millennial. We can understand 'Millennial' as a sociological category – those born after 1979, or from 1982–1996, depending on who you are reading (for example, Howker and Malik, 2010; Little, 2010). But we can also recognize it as a social type with ideological underpinnings. For example, in the UK and US news media Millennials were caricatured as 'snowflakes' who splash out on avocado on toast rather than buying their own homes, as well as being narcissists – remember the 2013 *Time* magazine's cover story about 'The Me Me Me Generation'. However, more recently we see authors, journalists and podcasters identifying with the label of Millennial and harnessing this to political critique. We explore why the Millennial became so visible after 2008 and to what purpose. We also examine how these discourses have changed over time. We discuss these questions further below, using conjunctural analysis from the Cultural Studies tradition.
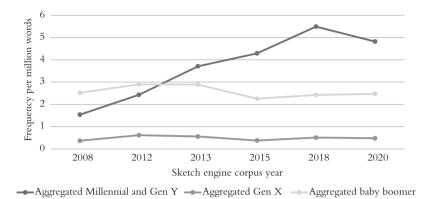
Figure 5.1: Generational terms on Anglophone Internet, 2008–20

Generation and the 2008 crisis

The 2008 financial crisis produced multiple locations for the identification of generational phenomena. We understand this moment as significant for a number of reasons. It was a time of social trauma but also a moment in history where broad cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 2005), that is the subsection of society taking the leading role in directing wider social orientation, shifted from financial services to digital capitalism. This was no revolution however, instead the crisis forced financial services into retreat and their project of financialization and quantification of all aspects of life was taken up in modified form by the 'New Patriarchs of Silicon Valley' (Little and Winch, 2021; Gilbert and Williams, 2022). Framing our argument through a period crisis is significant because, as Jonathan White, following June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner (2005) and others, argues, 'Generational consciousness and social trauma have tended to go hand-in-hand' (White, 2013, p 219).

The year 2008 was generational in two ways. The fallout from it meant that young people as a group were more badly affected than older people as a group (Howker and Malik, 2010; Milburn 2019). This doesn't mean that all older people escaped suffering and all younger people had their futures destroyed, rather that there was a strong and widely accepted understanding that people were differentially affected by age, backed largely by empirical data (although this is disputed or nuanced by various scholars and academics (see Roberts, 2015)). For example, generation or age intersects with specific structures of oppression such as class, citizenship and race (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016; Sobande, 2020). While much early mediated generational discourse bunched all young people under the figure of the white, middle class Millennial who became hypervisible, it is clear that the issues facing this figure or social type had already been part of a long and pervasive history for marginalized groups.

The second way 2008 was generational is that it was self–reflexively experienced as generational by those coming of age at that time (Howker and Malik, 2010; Clay, 2012; Scott, 2018; Petersen, 2022). The 'no more boom and bust' capitalism of the early 2000s was shown to be fallible: the technocratic proclamations of a utopia of endless growth by economists and politicians were revealed as wild optimism in the face of historical precedent. And yet key elements of the system were able to persist (Crouch, 2011). The visibility and inevitability of the climate crisis combined with the crash produced a psychic trauma for a generation. It was evident that the expectations young people might have for how their life would progress, how society would be organized in their lifetimes and so on would have to radically change. This is illustrated in books written by Millennials post–2018 and which we discuss in the final section.

A generation can be said to emerge in a moment of rupture. The work of Karl Mannheim can help us understand this in sociological terms. After 2008 the old socio-economic and political system was delegitimized. The neoliberal managerialism expressed in New Labour's 'Third Way' was replaced by digital capitalism, which did nothing to fix the underlying problems of the crisis. Indeed, key cultural features of neoliberalism were preserved. This is why Helen Anne Petersen states that Millennials recognize themselves to be 'human capital': subjects to be optimized for better performance in the economy (Petersen, 2021, p 47). The political and socio-economic effects of the financial crash and the rise of tech monopolies converged with the emergence of the smart phone as a key personal technology. These combined to produce a 'fresh contact' (Mannheim, 1952, p 293); a generation that came of age around that time or had early adulthood transformed by these developments. This isn't just significant because of the early mediated moral panics around young people's selfies and attendant narcissistic behaviours, but also because the smart phone deepened the datafication of all aspects of everyday life. It is to a deeper discussion of the conjuncture as an analytical approach that we now turn.

Conjunctural analysis

Cultural Studies has its roots in the interdisciplinary academic practices pioneered at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the 1960s through 1980s (see, in particular, Littler, 2016). Using this tradition, we look at both the mediatization of 'generation' and its use as an analytic or sociological category. As this book attests, generational theory is available to many different disciplines in different ways. Consequently, the interdisciplinarity of conjunctural Cultural Studies demands that we do not separate discursive locations from lived experience, or separate out the political from the subcultural, the authentically lived from

the mediated. This is why conjunctural analysis is a useful tool for making sense of generation's multiple valences. In particular, it helps to make sense of the lived experience of Millennials as sociological cohorts, as well as the mediated social type circulating through the US and UK media.

The conjuncture is a way of describing the balance of political forces in social, cultural and economic terms and that is often conducted through analysis of power relations in culture. It is a key concern for Cultural Studies in its political–analytic mode, particularly in the work of Stuart Hall. Of particular interest are the moments of movement from one state of affairs to another. Hall famously charted the movement from social democracy to what he termed Thatcherism or authoritarian populism but later became commonly defined as neoliberalism (Hall et al, 1978; Hall, 1979; Hall and Jacques, 1983; Hall et al, 2015). These movements mark a shift in the hegemonic ideology and concurrent common sense (common sense being an important concept in cultural studies to describe the normalization of dominant ideology and the social tensions and contradictions it can produce – see Massey, 2014). Through conjunctural analysis Hall identified early a shift from a consensus perspective, that called for a balance of social interests, to a firm emphasis on the market as the prevailing and valorized technology of governance. A market-orientated hegemony then, relies less on consensus and more upon what Jeremy Gilbert (2015) has called 'disaffected consent'. As we, and others, have argued we are now in a new conjuncture (Gilbert, 2019; Little and Winch, 2021). This new conjuncture is marked by a move from markets as a mechanism of economic governance towards a preference for monopoly and the use of market type mechanisms for governance of the individual. Instead of several companies effectively competing for market share in, say, Internet search or social media, these new economic fields are dominated by a single actor (Moore and Tambini, 2018; Noble, 2018). And while this happens at the corporate level, every element of our existence is quantified, measured and compared, as datafication extends metrics, previously reserved for the competitive performance of companies to assess share prices, to individuals (Zuboff, 2019; Benjamin, 2019; Couldry and Meijias, 2019). Thus while we might recognize the daily accounting of friends on Facebook, followers on Twitter or views on TikTok being part of the mundane experience of smart phone users, we can also see the steady movement to assessment of capabilities to early years education (Jarke and Breiter, 2019). We can see the emergence of data being used in the workplace to assess the relative economic value of staff members – to the degree of measuring keystrokes or footsteps, in some cases even heart rates (Moore and Robinson 2016). Data is used to assess and compare, to assign value, and this marks an intensification of the market–orientated ideologies of neoliberalism, both in the daily lives of individuals as well as in corporations. This conjuncture

is then also defined by the convergence of the neoliberal project with the dataism of Silicon Valley.

These conjunctural shifts are significant when considering the production, mediatization and visibility of the Millennial. A number of actors dominate mainstream public discourse around generation: policy makers and think tanks who generate reports and press releases to be circulated in the public sphere, journalists and politicians, industry spokespeople, and the different arms of promotional media. We suggest that these actors played a significant part in the circulation of generational discourse, especially before 2018. Dataism ushered in an era of intense market shift from competition between brands in the mass media, to narrowband targeting of goods and services to new categories of consumer. For this shift to occur, new ways of making sense of social groups were needed. Consequently, generation became a key layer in the micro-division of consumer subject (Kotliar, 2020). Thus, the Millennial was, significantly, widely talked about as a target demographic (Ferreira, 2020). The traditional ways of targeting demographics through television, magazines, cinema, had become difficult, especially as potential consumers could find ways to avoid being advertised at. How to reach young people was a constant source of conversation in promotional media (and still is – this time in the collective figure of Gen Z (for example, Bloomberg, 2022)). This is compounded by the rise in data-driven advertising and tracking, which meant that online demographics such as 'young people' were intensely surveilled, categorized and analysed. And this aggregated data was used to predict future markets (Zuboff, 2019). In addition, young people were more visible in terms of representations on social media, which itself drove much popular and political media discourse. Young people also became a barometer of how to understand the contemporary moment: for example, in reports such as the 2012 US report commissioned by the Applied Research Center (now called Race Forward) titled *Don't Call Them 'Post-Racial': Millennials' Attitudes on Race, Racism and Key Systems in Our Society*. It is to a more focused examination of the multivarious public voices dominating mainstream media discourse about Millennials that we now turn.

Social contract: UK think tanks

In this section we discuss the Intergenerational Centre (housed in UK think tank the Resolution Foundation) and the UK advocacy organization the Intergenerational Foundation (also registered as a charity). Both organizations have been founded to mobilize policy and public debate including media conversations around questions of generation. We suggest here that such organizations are key distributors of political and media debate on generation. Because of their relationships with journalists and politicians, they are able

to drive public conversations through strategic communications and with the research they commission. What is significant about both organizations is the emphasis on the social contract between generations – this was a discourse that was particularly prominent from 2008 but has waned to make way for Brexit and more recently the Cost of Living Crisis. For example, the 2017 Conservative Party manifesto, led by Theresa May, focused on 'A Restored Contract Between the Generations'. By 2019, the emphasis of then Conservative Party leader Boris Johnson's had shifted to getting 'Brexit Done'.

The Resolution Foundation is an independent think tank with a focus on the living standards of low and middle-income households. Through the establishment of the Intergenerational Commission (2016–18), and subsequently the Intergenerational Centre, it aims to inform and mobilize politicians, policy makers and media discourse to think about households and wealth in terms of generation and generational transmission. Thus, generation is a means 'to track' national socio-economic change through time. The Resolution Foundation employs three communication officers and issues regular press releases, as well as hosting events which are then remediated in various media outlets. David Willetts is president of the Intergenerational Centre and is a former Conservative minister who wrote *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future – And Why They Should Give it Back* (2010; there was a new edition in 2019) which centred the broken contract between generations. Bristow and others have argued that Willetts deploys generational conflict as part of an ideological move that is unnecessarily divisive in a bid to roll back the welfare state (White, 2013; Bristow, 2021).

The Intergenerational Foundation was set up in 2011 'to promote intergenerational fairness and protect the interests of younger and future generations across all areas of policy' (Intergenerational Foundation, 2022). It was set up with help from Ed Howker and Shiv Malik, who co-authored *Jilted Generation: How Britain Bankrupted Its Youth* (2010). Its website is addressed to young people; the homepage reads 'Your Future. Now'. Like The Resolution Foundation it conducts (or pays for) substantial research to influence policy makers, issuing press releases to spark media debate. It also has a social media presence and interactive campaign suggestions, such as a letter template to write to the local MP around the housing crisis for young people.

Both organizations focus on the intergenerational transmission of property, linking it to the social contract between generations. In 2016 the Resolution Foundation set up the 'Intergenerational Commission'. The press release states that the Commission will 'set out changes that will renew the social contract between the generations, ensuring that younger generations benefit from a growing economy in the same way as previous ones have' (Resolution

Foundation, 2016). The Intergenerational Foundation similarly focuses on the social contract and intergenerational fairness. Its homepage states: 'We think it's only fair that younger generations should have the same or a better standard of living as the generations who have gone before. That means creating a new, fairer contract between the generations: one that reduces intergenerational inequality, and provides for tomorrow as well as today' (Intergenerational Foundation, 2022).

By arguing for an intergenerational contract, the organizations deploy a Burkean understanding of generation. The generational thought of Edmund Burke (1729–97) centres the importance of property-based hierarchies and the transfer of wealth across time. He stresses the significance of a social contract between generations in order to maintain what Burke perceives to be natural class hierarchies: 'Society is indeed a contract … it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born' (Burke, 2001, p 261).

It is because of the focus on the social contract that generation was – and to some extent still is – discussed in terms of conflict and betrayal. The multiple books that were published at the same time as *The Pinch* – as well as the promotional apparatus around them – focus on the struggle between generations precisely because the social contract is centred as a key organizing principle of society: rather than, for example, class struggle. This is why, although the Resolution Foundation researches and advocates to some extent for the improvement in the living wages of low- and middle-income households, the main driver is not a critique of capitalist structures but of preserving the social contract across time, which allows for the transmission of property through familial generations. We can see how the discursive formulations of these organizations in relation to the intergenerational social contract, conflict between generations and the amplification of generational identities, are part of a wider public discourse and have been since their inception. Indeed, we can see their purpose as appropriated by and incorporated into a wider strategic push from those in power, to redirect public debate towards the generational contract – including generational conflict – and away from an attack on financial and digital capitalism.

Millennials as social type

The Millennial was a figure of anxiety in relation to the transmission of household wealth as outlined by the UK think tanks above. Focusing on the disparities in wealth between the Millennial and the Baby Boomer, Willetts, for instance, recasts the conjuncture – via the paradigm of the generational contract – in familial terms. His work blames the parents and

thus obscures how (financial) capitalism has let down young people. What we can see here is how a particular description of a social problem mobilizes different forms of action which then gains recursive legitimation through the establishment of that description as a kind of 'common sense' (Hall and O'Shea, 2014). Social protests that would previously be understood through the language of race or class are replaced by an acceptance of generational social categories – most commonly the Boomer versus the Millennial – that lack the historicism of previous analyses and mobilize solutions in those terms.

The Millennial was also forged through public discourse as a social type. This was particularly the case in the early days of the figure's visibility post–2008, encapsulated in the image of smashed-avocado-eating snowflake. Jo Littler argues that the hippie (Hall, 1969), the chav (Tyler, 2013) and the yummy mummy (Littler, 2013) have been discussed as overdetermined figures 'that gain their force as figures repeated across different media' (Littler, 2013, p 228). These social types 'are usually expressive of an underlying social crisis or anxiety that plays itself out through such excessive and caricatured forms, types that are usually, to some extent, mobilized as figures of fun' (Littler, 2013, p 228). Young people became a vector for both understanding and steering the discursive formations emerging from the crisis. The Millennial as a discursive figure played out anxieties over the recklessness of the banks; caricatured as consuming pricey coffee, rather than investing in the property ladder (a ladder that had become almost impossible to climb). This was combined with the hegemony of dataism: while much early mainstream media attention was focused on the narcissistic Millennial girl taking, editing and sharing endless photos of herself, she was a foil to Silicon Valley's ideology of dataism, which was becoming entrenched as a dominant structuring social force in the post–2008 conjuncture.

It is useful to compare generational terms with the circulation of 'class'. In Figure 5.1 we can see the rise of Millennial from 2008. In Figure 5.2 we can see that from 2008 the term 'working class' plummeted. Both figures were generated the same way using the same billion word plus web scrapes in Sketch Engine.

This is no coincidence. There was an ideological shift to obscure the failings of capitalism and the politicization of young people by erasing the language of class and domesticating it within the terms of the Millennial and the Baby Boomer (Bristow, 2015; Little and Winch 2017). Moreover, the tables indicate in numeric form the increased importance of the generational frame, forged through the paradigm of the generational contract or Millennial as a social type. We suggest that both were appropriated and harnessed in the diluting of class as a mobilizing force to address the unresolved financial crisis of 2008.
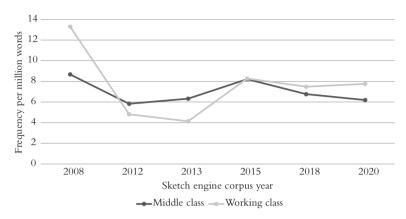
Figure 5.2: References to class groups on Anglophone Internet, 2008–20

Millennials as entrepreneurs

We see how this vulgar use of generational figures can be played out in a celebrified appropriation of a generational frame. Millennial discourses are particularly popular in these instances for PR purposes to efface differences and express the concerns and responsibilities of people in specific social locations as representing a universal generation. Again, when thinking conjuncturally about the economic decline following the financial crash and rise of technology companies, this happens most obviously in the generational social types produced in the rhetoric of technology entrepreneurs, the dominant figures within the new hegemonic order.

Here we look at how Mark Zuckerberg frames his 2017 commencement speech at Harvard (among other places) to argue for the entrepreneurial zeal of people born at the same time as him. He argues that Millennials have a shared mission to seek purpose, not just for themselves but for others. The speech effectively equates Zuckerberg's own ideological mission with that of the Millennial: he shapes a narrative where social responsibility falls on the shoulders of a whole generation but with problems that his company or his foundation are directly orientated to solve. Thus, he claims that economic decline and social isolation can be addressed by a social network like Facebook, while his great wealth is focused on tackling specific health issues. And for inequality as inherited by Millennials: they will not only find new solutions, they will think about it differently. As he puts it: 'I want to talk about three ways to create a world where everyone has a sense of purpose: by taking on big meaningful projects together, by redefining equality so everyone has the freedom to pursue purpose, and by building community across the world' (Zuckerberg, 2017).

While his core message is progressive, classically social democratic even, the displacement of a language of class with one of generation as the key social agent puts him in line with the think tank literature we looked at earlier:

> Every generation expands its definition of equality. Previous generations fought for the vote and civil rights. They had the New Deal and Great Society. Now it's our time to define a new social contract for our generation.
>
> We should have a society that measures progress not just by economic metrics like GDP, but by how many of us have a role we find meaningful. We should explore ideas like universal basic income to give everyone a cushion to try new things. We're going to change jobs many times, so we need affordable childcare to get to work and healthcare that aren't tied to one company. We're all going to make mistakes, so we need a society that focuses less on locking us up or stigmatizing us. And as technology keeps changing, we need to focus more on continuous education throughout our lives.
>
> And yes, giving everyone the freedom to pursue purpose isn't free. People like me should pay for it. Many of you will do well and you should too. (Zuckerberg, 2017)

Thus Zuckerberg's key mobilizing themes are purpose, charity and community addressed through questions of inequality and social justice. But these are not legitimated through a traditional lens of inequality, instead it is the generational figure of the entrepreneur who will facilitate new responses to these pressing questions.

Note that this social contract isn't an intergenerational Burkean agreement. Rather it is located in the wealth and ideology generated by digital capitalism. Zuckerberg's mobilization of social justice here comes at a moment when he was at least partly considering standing for an elected position or some other sort of public service. He spent part of 2017 on a political-style tour of the US and changed the Certificate of Incorporation for Facebook allowing him to take up government position or office. Thus, this is perhaps not just PR, but political PR. We understand this speech as part of his political campaign tied to his larger celebrification that was forged to legitimate and obscure his immense power (Winch and Little, 2021).

Zuckerberg's public image diminished shortly after this speech as the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke, but the political project expounded by Zuckerberg has been taken up by Andrew Yang, a one-time Democrat politician with a tech background who explicitly promotes values associated with Millennial tech culture. He produced the documentary *Generation*

StartUp (Houser and Wade, 2016) as a key part of the construction of his political celebrity. The documentary charts the experiences of six start-up founders and workers as part of the regeneration of the city of Detroit over two years. Focusing on disparate examples within the city's tech ecosystem, the film's message is that entrepreneurs are heroic, generational figures, delivering on social change by making (mostly) tech-orientated capitalism a vehicle for transformation. While the film presents an ethnically diverse cast of men and women, the paradigmatic example it offers is the white male-run property company operating out of a frat-house style workspace on a technology product. All the other examples are deviations from the central core. And it is this figure of the paradigmatic entrepreneur, for whom Mark Zuckerberg acts as a role model and cultural touchstone, restless and focused on success under difficult self-set challenges, that comes to define the generational figure presented.

Millennial as generation units

We end this chapter by discussing the connections between the Millennial as a discursive formulation (including a social type) and the Millennial as a sociological category. As we argued above, conjunctural analysis allows us to see the Millennial as both. Sofia Aboim and Pedro Vasconcelos argue for the importance of generation as a discursive formation over and above its traditional location as a sociological category. More than this, they suggest that individuals relate to these discourses 'in order to build self-identification'; and that individuals 'must always position themselves in face of the narratives that have come to be dominant to describe a given generational location' (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014, p 165). In contrast, we understand that this theorization of generation as a form of discursive self-understanding *works with* sociological generations as a means of making sense of a change in conjuncture. In other words, using conjunctural analysis and Mannheim's conceptualization of 'generation units' we can understand generational discourse and social groups *as being in dialogue*.

For the protagonists of *Generation Startup* it is figures like Zuckerberg to whom they are positioning in generational terms. Zuckerberg embraces this in his speech: 'Many of our parents had stable jobs throughout their careers. Now we're all entrepreneurial, whether we're starting projects or finding our role. And that's great. Our culture of entrepreneurship is how we create so much progress' (Zuckerberg, 2017).

The generational ideology binding the Millennial to the entrepreneur is operationalized in this discourse, and it is constructed along hegemonic, conjunctural lines, by leading figures within a dominant group who then invite a wider identification with their position: that is, describing, legitimating and mobilizing others by using generation as a means to

ideological ends. This means the process they describe can be wielded for very specific political projects and in ways that speak to a kind of common sense that must then be renegotiated by those engaging with it. The characters in Yang's documentary, then, are part of what Mannheim would call a 'generation unit' (Mannheim, 1952, p 306). In other words, they are using a shared generational experience of a moment of socio-economic transformation, as the raw material of their unity. The people that form this generation unit are bound by the financial crash and rise of dataism, and they reproduce in their life and discourse the rhetoric of figures like Zuckerberg. But, crucially, they also are engaged in various forms of struggle around the meaning of this generational identity.

This sense of struggle was important for Mannheim, to understand how these generation units come together to form a 'generation as actuality' (1952, p 302). Aboim and Vasconcelos's theorization again needs extending and challenging, if we are to make sense of very different sort of texts that discursively rework the Millennial for more progressive politics, like Anne Helen Petersen's *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* (2021), and Shaun Scott's *Millennials and the Moments That Made Us: A Cultural History of the US from 1982–Present* (2018). In these books, the authors explicitly locate themselves as generational figures. They address, challenge, subvert and appropriate the social type of the Millennial but contextualize this figure in a socio-economic terrain as well as in lived experiences through popular culture, autoethnography, and interviews with contemporaries. Petersen's and Scott's books can be understood as articulating discursive formations to contested sociological categories. And both books theorize the Millennial as caught up in the oppressive structures of neoliberal capitalism. For this reason, their work mobilizes the figure of the Millennial partly to make an intervention into the ongoing mainstream representation of the Millennial as white, entitled and disconnected from wider capitalist structures. We can also see them as disengaging generational experience or identity from the kind of ideological work that Zuckerberg or Yang are deploying in their attempt to garner consensus to the structures of digital capitalism. This is where we can see the potential, but also the limits, of the discursive formations that Abiom and Vasconseulos valorize.

For example, Petersen makes strong claims for a universal generational feeling and experience – specifically of exhaustion – in attempt to describe an historical figure and to mobilize a generational intervention. She argues that: 'Millennials became the first generation to fully conceptualize themselves as walking college resumés. With assistance from our parents, society, and educators, we came to understand ourselves, consciously or not, as "human capital": subjects to be optimized for better performance in the economy' (Petersen, 2021, p 47).

Recognizing the Millennial as a product of wider socio-economic shifts in American society, she also casts generation in familial terms, arguing that burnout has been passed from parents to their children as parents became fearful of losing the middle-class status that had been accumulated through the 1960s onwards but which was under attack from financialization and the ensuing crash. More than this, she recognizes the 'entrepreneurial culture' that Zuckerberg celebrates as one that has invited depression and despair as, thanks to financial capitalism, this generation no longer have their parents' 'stable jobs' (see also Ho, 2009).

Shaun Scott, a Black writer, explicitly locates Millennials as 'the most diverse and disprivileged generation ever' (2018). His book traces the lifecycle of the Millennial in tandem with contemporary popular culture, from the childhood of the 1980s where they were marketed to, up until the present where Millennials have made an 'active impact on our surroundings as adults'. Again, this work makes an intervention into mainstream discourse by describing a multicultural and diverse understanding of the Millennial which then transforms its figurative capacity to legitimate and mobilize other forms of action. Indeed, these later appropriations of the Millennial as theorized through the workings of capitalism and cultural change, may be linked to how, as we can see in Figure 5.2, the concept of class was rising again in 2014. It was at this time that a wave of populist politicians of both left and right around the world started to mobilize people on anti-establishment platforms that used class as a key delineating feature to separate their followers from a remote elite.

These positions can be tied to a range of new forms of politics that have had a generational element: from Black Lives Matter and #MeToo to the waves of political populism often mobilized by much older leaders like Bernie Sanders in the US and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK. These social movements brought generational struggles over the cost of higher education, house prices and environmentalism into mainstream politics. Movements tied to Sanders and Corbyn used class as a key delineating feature to separate their followers from a remote elite. These progressive generation units thus indicate the limits too of privileging a discursive understanding of the Millennial as that negotiation over its identity-meaning spills over into highly charged political debates and back again.

Generation as a political movement

That said, the marrying of generational discourses with political and social movements can be highly ambivalent in terms of effectiveness and outcome. While there is an inclusive use of generational discourse to mobilize groups for progressive transformation, this is far less common in popular usage than more conservative discourses. For example there are conservative and

liberal versions of generational-type politics which take into account race and gender but do not consider the ways that gender and race intersect with class or capitalism as part of a structural analysis or 'racial capitalism' (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Generation is more commonly employed as part of a totalizing discourse which asserts its primacy against, or in the face of, other historical forms of oppression such as racism or sexism. Often its use obscures other framings of political inequality (Little, 2014). Generation when used to mobilize people can produce a 'fun house mirror' (Banet Weiser, 2018) of liberation politics. That is, vulgar generational discourses make a claim that a group (Millennials, for instance) is oppressed by either the dominant group (Baby Boomers) or society as whole at a structural level and needs redress in the interests of social justice; alternatively, claims can be made about the virtues of these generations which then valorize and distinguish them from other generations – as we see above with Mark Zuckerberg's appropriation of the Millennial.

These discourses simplify things to a few narrow, sometimes partly empirical, arguments but can erase other forms of oppression. Generational politics focusing on a specific generation does not have a history before the emergence of that generation as a political unit. This is in contrast to Black Liberation movements, for example where generations of activists understand themselves in relation to those who have gone before (for instance, Black Lives Matter and the Civil Rights movement (Winch, 2017)). Moreover, when a generation is used as part of, or to supplant, class politics or feminism, it empties out that social movement of its longer history.

Generation mobilized as a movement-for-itself can also lack the complexity of intersectional interaction and struggle which happens within those movements: for example, the ways in which women negotiated their role in the civil rights movement against sexism (Combahee River Collective, 1978), or Black people struggled against racism in class-based movements and feminist movements (James, 1975; Josephs, 1981; Springer, 2002). Generation's power as a mobilizing discourse is that it offers a *tabula rasa* free from those internal struggles; a pure politics unencumbered by movement history. The reason why generational discourses do this so effectively is because they must be constantly renewed. In other words, each 'generation' must have its primary struggle reimagined and rearticulated not just the first time it emerges but also as each subsequent generational cohort emerges behind it.

The movements against racism and sexism have their own temporalities, their own waves or their own internal generations (Shilliam, 2015; Little and Winch, 2017; Sobande, 2020). But the primary forms of action in these cases are against discrimination, oppression or violence based on race or gender. Generation, used sensitively in these spaces can deepen understanding, adding an element of cultural change or humanize a historical context (del

Guadalupe Davidson, 2017; Scott, 2018). However, it is just as likely to be a location for internal conflict within these movements – harnessing differences between second wave and younger feminists as an explanation that is then used to divide and mobilize the two groups against each other (Hemmings, 2011; Winch, Littler and Keller, 2016). Yet, if we return to the conjuncture we can see how the generational relationship to these movements can be rooted in a wider sociological (and political/cultural) moment and are part of necessary political renewal. The effectiveness of the discourses generated by think tanks stems from their ability to describe a sociological reality in new but recognizable terms. This is still ideological labour for a specific purpose, but it is one that contains enough truth for it to be widely adopted.

The relationship between the sociological and the discursive runs deeper through this conjunctural lens. Understanding the subjects of Andrew Yang's documentary as part of a 'generation unit' – a group of people who make social interventions based on an understanding of politics and society that stems from a novel generational experience – is revealing. In their case this is as part of the 'founder culture' (Little and Winch, 2021) that valorizes young 'genius' men with an engineering orientation that became a central locus in the rise of digital capitalism. But there are many other such generation units which emerged from the post-crash shift following 2008. Petersen and Scott in their books are also engaged with, and writing for, generation units contesting the dominant understandings of 'Millennial'. There are others that map, more or less, onto opposition to or alignment with the emergent social order post-2008. We have mentioned ones tied to social movements, but these can also take the form of youth subcultures (Hall and Jefferson, 1976): Grime music could be seen as an oppositional generational movement, or the philanthropic movement known as Effective Altruism can be seen as a sub-culture aligning with tech's hegemony, to give two illustrative examples.

It is this complex of generational association and contestation that allows us to perceive an 'actual generation'. Generations are not monolithic groups or distinct discourses or social movements, but they are a set of cultural, social and political responses, which are lived as well as debated. Not everyone of a certain age group will share this experience equally, but it is tied to a specific moment in history, usually one of rapid change. João Pina-Cabral and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos develop the work of Spanish theorist José Ortega y Gasset ([1933–4] 1982) in order to bring together generation and the conjuncture. They show that Ortega y Gasset's use of the crisis in generational formation is, fundamentally, similar to Gramsci and Hall's use of conjunctural shift to indicate a major transformation of social formations (Pina-Cabral and Theodossopoulos, 2022, p 461). They argue that there is a correlation between conjuncture and generation in terms of individual self-perception and a fluctuating collective identity. In other words, the conjunctural shifts that mark our identity can also mark shared,

partial or whole generational identities. Yet it is also in perceiving the way that 'generation units' – for example, the tech founders that Zuckerberg champions alongside #BLM and young socialist followers of Sanders and Corbyn for instance – build into a wider 'actual generation' that we feel we can see the most useful overlap between the conjuncture and generation. And it is this 'actual generation', with its disagreements and contestations tied to shared cultural reference points that shows us the contour of the conjunctural shift that produced it.

In conclusion, then, we should see the Millennial, as both a discursive figure and a site of material political contestation. In its commonly mediated form, it is a caricatured social type. But the 'Millennial' offers both discursive material for self-understanding for a group born at a particular time *and* a location for contestation between distinct sub-groups, all of whom make some claim on a shared generational experience. And it is in the confluence between these things that a new conjuncture, marked by anxiety over climate crisis, a remaking of social purpose after the 2008 crash, as well as the adoption of the technology and ideologies of the smart phone, can be most clearly seen.

Note

[1] The data for all the graphs in this chapter were generated using the concordance function of the SketchEngine.eu software which (among other things) counts the word frequency of a term within a billion word-plus scrape of the English Language internet in that year. The datasets used were: EngTenTen2008, EnTenTen2012, EnTenTen2013, EnTenTen2015, EnTenTen2018 and EnTenTen2020. Search terms aggregate common formulations of a term: 'Baby Boomer' with 'Boomer' and 'Gen X' with 'Generation X'. There are a small number of false positives using this method as Boomer can be used to refer to a sports team and Millennial can be used as part of a non-generational periodization. However, from analysis of use-in-context through the same software, these false positives are very low (under 1 per cent).

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