

Book Review

James Cairns, *The Myth of the Age of Entitlement: Millennials, Austerity, and Hope*

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At first glance, given the title of this book, one might infer that it discusses the generational culture and lifestyles of millennials. In reality, however, James Cairns' focus is on criticizing the structural forces that have reproduced and exacerbated social inequality, which have resulted in the plights of millennials across multiple social fields, including the workplace, on campus, and the natural environment. The book starts with a brief introduction to the myth about the millennial generation—how they are often presumed to be a group of spoiled, narcissistic, and irresponsible young adults who grew up enjoying material comfort and technological advancements unavailable to previous generations; and how they are ill-prepared for the “real world,” where all the nice things they believe they are entitled to will not be handed to them for free.

In chapter two, Cairns debunks this myth. He argues that millennials are facing unprecedented struggles in today's economic and political system, and they are constantly disempowered, devalued, and threatened by financial insecurity. According to Cairns, the “privileges” that the millennials request, such as job security, equal opportunity, and a clean planet, are in fact basic human rights that should have been made available to the whole population. These elementary rights, however, have long been sacrificed due to society's neoliberal dispositions and a false democracy that trades the welfare of the “99 percent” for the profits of a few. Similar to how calls for racial, ethnic, and gender equality were considered excessive and unnecessary in the past, the millennials' legitimate claims are also stigmatized and muted in discourses of neoliberal economy and meritocracy. To subvert these dominant discourses, we need an up-to-date understanding of manifestations of inequality in the contemporary society (e.g., higher education may cause indebted graduates' downward mobility on the social hierarchy), a bold imagination to secure welfare for the majority (e.g., the minimum wage should not only cover the survival needs defined in the old days, but should guarantee a sustainable lifestyle in modern society), and radical democratic projects to empower all citizens.

The following three chapters explore three arenas in which youth are oppressed by institutionalized social injustice. Chapter three discusses the gig economy, which requires employees to settle for less while maximizing the profits of business owners. Due to economic and job insecurity, job seekers are left with few choices other than serving the very system that exploited them in the first place. Versatile, competent, and aspirational young men and women fight for job positions that leave them underemployed and underpaid.

In line with this argument, in chapter four, Cairns contends that workers have been trained to serve the interests of today's neoliberal, precarious economy before they even enter the job market: market-oriented postsecondary education steers students toward consumerism and convinces them that they are entitled to nothing beyond that which they can afford. While education has legitimized this “settle-for-less” logic, alternative options to carry out social equality, such as through state power or redistribution of wealth, appear to be unrealistic and infeasible.

In chapter five, Cairns discusses how social and economic development has come at a tremendous cost to the planet. Citizens who struggle to make ends meet may choose to either ignore how corporations unethically exploit natural resources or, reluctantly, become part of

these businesses. Solutions to save our environment were commodified and, ironically, sold to consumers to resolve a problem that was first created at the cost of all humankind.

In the concluding chapter, Cairns references the presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders, suggesting that all citizens should have guaranteed economic rights. Cairns contends that change is possible, as long as most of us, not just the millennials, believe that our economy could operate in another way.

Throughout his book, Cairns presents a clear argument, supported by pertinent case examples and alarming numbers. However, Cairns' perspective seems to be unidimensional, because he focuses only on one possible way in which social inequality is institutionalized, instead of including alternative potential interpretations.

To address this concern, Cairns could have speculated on how the myth of the millennials originated, and how it might be true to a certain extent and within a specific context. Readers may be curious as to why and how the myth is so loud and pervasive when their personal experiences are the opposite, even if Cairns briefly explains the cause of the myth in the last few pages. Through a more in-depth examination around how the myth was shaped, and how it reflects the millennials' behaviors superficially without addressing the underlying rationales, readers may gain better insights and understanding.

For example, the fact that millennials seem less interested in being independent from their parents may be due to their economic hardship (e.g., boomerang generations who simply cannot afford to live alone). Another possibility is that Internet usage has changed millennials' psychological features and social interactions, thus, independence is not signaled through being socially active (e.g., dating; driving around with friends) (Twenge, 2017). In this example, there is some truth to the myth of millennials being less independent than previous generations, and there are multiple factors that should be pieced together to reveal a broader, more holistic picture of their lived experiences. Similarly, the myth that millennials are lighthearted spenders may be informative if properly contextualized; that is, we also consider the fact that people lose their incentive to make long-term financial plans (e.g., saving money) when they believe their future social positions cannot change through individual efforts (Yoon and Kim, 2016). In other words, the myth that youth live paycheck to paycheck because of a carefree mindset is less accurate than the notion that they no longer believe in the "ladder of opportunity."

Furthermore, while this book is much needed and gives voice to marginalized millennials who are being pushed into disadvantaged social positions, the millennials are not a homogenous group and, as such, may develop a range of different strategies to acquire their sought-after social justice. The more the myth is debunked, the more questions arise, because Cairns tells us more about what the millennials are not rather than what they are. For example, while some may believe that change should be driven by subversive power outside of the neoliberal economy, what if for others, the power of change can come from the neoliberal economy per se, such as how crowdfunding benefits new ideas, and a sharing economy allows access without ownership? Could these new activities of the digital economy become unique toolkits exclusive for the

millennial generation, enabling them to be more resilient to economic hardship than previous generations?

For readers of *Journal of Consumer Culture*, this book provides solid background knowledge about the millennials' plight in today's economic reality, especially regarding their struggles in the system of production. However, discussions about their consumption practices, which are definitely influenced by their economic status, are absent. Given that one's socioeconomic status has long been used to account for lifestyle variations, it may be time for us to interrogate how social inequality and downward mobility shape today's consumer culture. Who is left behind in the neoliberal economy? How are they coping? How is the plight of the millennials manifested in the consumption practices of multiple age cohorts, including adults, emerging adults, and teenagers? What kind of social boundaries can be established if the entire generation is experiencing similar economic insecurity? How does the millennial plight intersect with other social identities? Moreover, what kinds of mobilization in our everyday shopping could be performed to balance social injustice? This book serves as an excellent starting point for scholars to examine how consumption shapes and is shaped by how people adapt, cope, and make sense of the precarious economy.

The aforementioned concerns in no way trump the merits of this refined, timely, well-documented yet easy-to-read book. Its vivid descriptions and inspiring stories should be of interest to scholars and the general public alike. Setting out to rehabilitate the millennials' reputation, this book straightens out tangled misconceptions that altogether constitute the so-called structural forces that are impeding the youth's pursuit of happiness. This is a book not only for those interested in youth culture, but for anyone desiring an equal and just society.

Citation

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