

Political books

Kids These Days by Malcolm Harris – no free brunch

Far from being work-shy, millennials may in fact be too diligent and productive for their own good



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Self-obsessed, radical, atomised, social, hard-working, lazy, disobedient, risk-averse — the media have given us more than enough adjectives to describe millennials but few intellectual frameworks to understand them. This is partly why generational analysis is viewed sceptically: unlike class, race or gender, which latch on to something concrete, generations can seem arbitrary and abstract. Any quality can be ascribed to members of a diverse group of people who happened to be born within the same stretch of time, so what can be gained from such thinking?

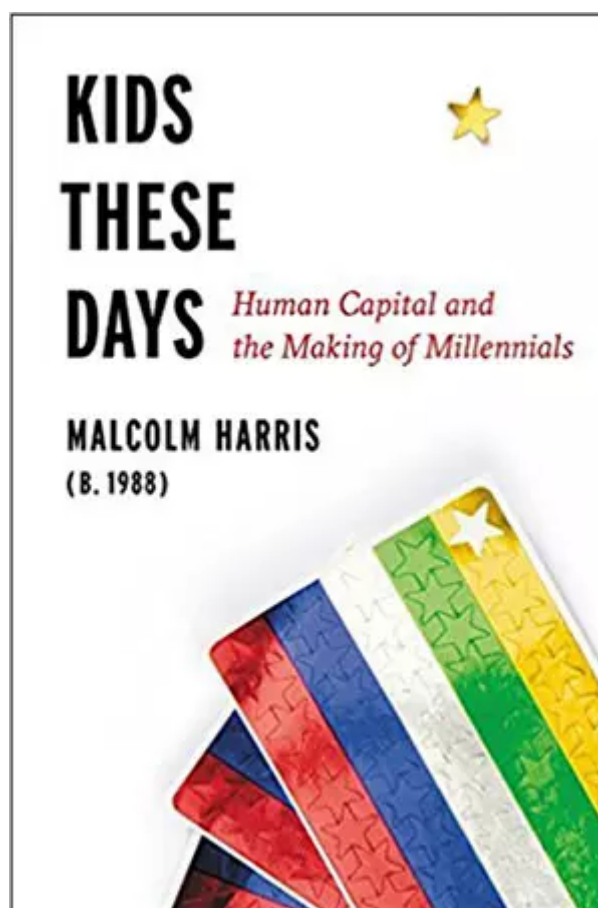
In *Kids These Days*, the journalist and critic Malcolm Harris restores a good deal of precision to the business of defining the millennial and generational discourse in general. Adhering to a Marxian and behaviourist account of society, Harris argues that you cannot understand millennials — those born between 1980 and 2000, which include him, and me for that matter — without examining the political, economic and social institutions that nurtured them. He focuses on the US but much of what he describes applies to Britain too.

His first contention is whether generations and, by extension, millennials, exist. After all, people are always being born, so how can we divide them into discrete sets? Echoing the sociologist Karl Mannheim, who argued in the 1920s that distinctive cohorts emerge from periods of social destabilisation, Harris claims “generations are characterised by crises”. It was the development of neoliberal capitalism over the past 40 years, a system that has “started to hyperventilate” since the 2008 crash, that provided the specific crisis through which millennials came into

being. As such, they can be understood as historical products “whose abilities, skills, emotions and even sleep schedule are in sync with their role in the economy”.

This folds into the central analytic claim: what makes the millennial situation distinctive is that it has produced workers who are too well-trained for their own good. Contrary to the stereotype of American millennials as a generation more interested in eating brunch than honest graft, the evidence shows that they are “damn good workers”, with unprecedented levels of education. The problem is that millennials are producing lots of value at work that is not reflected in job quality or wages. Productivity and real wages grew together during the Baby Boomers’ heyday; their divergence in our age, for Harris, is “perhaps the single phenomenon that defines Millennials thus far”.

Through this lens we get a sweeping sketch of the bleak, anxiety-ridden lives of young Americans. Childhood, which is supposed to be the province of spontaneous play, has become highly administered, with parents and schools priming their human capital investments — children — for a merciless jobs market: “Between 1981 and 1997, elementary schoolers . . . recorded a whopping 146 per cent gain in time spent studying.” For those who make it through the debt and stress of university to graduation, short-term contracts and underemployment are leading to increased mental health problems, as millennials internalise the economy’s instability.



Harris is at his most forceful when arguing that society conspires to make life worse for young people. The children's book *Danny Dunn and the Homework Machine* (1958), about a boy who invents a machine to do his homework for him only to be tricked into doing more with his spare time, is smartly used to illustrate the way automation doesn't always increase freedom. The implication is also that we live in a world that exhausts youthful ingenuity. These sections put the reader in mind of anarchist theorists such as Paul Goodman, whose book *Growing Up Absurd* (1960) championed the virtues of juvenilia against "the organised system" for a previous disaffected generation.

But unlike the *soixante-huitards*, Harris gives the impression, correctly, that he doesn't see young people as essentially good or as the new agents of historical change. Millennials do not occupy a structurally vital position in society that will give them leverage over the future, as the proletariat does in Marxist theory. And although they might be drawn to the politics of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, in part for having no lived experience of cold war anti-communism, they have also buoyed the candidature of Marine Le Pen and swelled the ranks of the alt-right. The stable jobs that Goodman condemned as spiritually bankrupt in the 1960s are now a luxury; progressive politics do not necessarily emerge from such relative desperation.

To this end, *Kids These Days* disavows a prescriptive conclusion. Harris is sceptical about traditional forms of political strategy, even questioning the usefulness of protest. The rejection of a platitudinous rallying call is welcome, and the reticence is warranted. But it also shows up the limits of generational analysis, which can give detail and texture to the impasse that young people find themselves in — but offers less on the question of what is to be done.

[Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials](#), by Malcolm Harris, Little, Brown, RRP\$27, 272 pages

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