

Keir Milburn, *Generation Left*  
 Polity Press: Cambridge 2019, £9.99, paperback  
 139 pp, 978 1 5095 3223 0

OLIVER EAGLETON

## POLITICAL GENERATIONS

Last December, YouGov analysis of the 2019 UK general election results found, to nobody's surprise, that 'age is still the biggest dividing line in British politics'. Labour had a 43-point advantage with the under-25s, while the Tories led by 47 points among the over-65s. Likelihood of voting Conservative increased by 9 per cent for every decade of life. This disparity was just as pronounced during the 2017 election—when the gap in voting intentions between the youngest and oldest grew to a cavernous 97 per cent—and the EU referendum, which saw retirees back Leave in overwhelming numbers. Yet the generational fault-line now taken for granted by the commentariat has opened up rapidly. Just ten years ago, support for the main parties was roughly equal among 18–24 year-olds.

This sudden polarization—which has informed several progressive insurgencies since the financial crash: not just Corbyn's Labour, but Podemos, Syriza, Mélenchon, Sanders—is the subject of Keir Milburn's *Generation Left*: a concise intervention on the relationship between age and class, pooling the theoretical resources of Mannheim, Tronti and Badiou to identify what generates a generation. Milburn is a lecturer in political economy at the University of Leicester and an active member of Plan C: a diffuse anti-capitalist collective that uses experimental organizing methods to raise consciousness and combat the far-right. He co-hosts the 'Acid Corbynism' podcast on Novara Media, which applies Fisherian *Kulturkritik* to hippyish topics like love, freedom and friendship, and his new book is inflected by this outlook: eclectic in its references, optimistic in its analysis, acutely sensitive to cultural affects.

Milburn begins by dispelling the idea that generations are established solely through demographic trends. The Baby Boomers, he writes, came

about through a dramatic rise in birth-rates between 1945 and 1965, yet this bulge was bookended by two events that demography cannot explain: the end of WWII and the introduction of the contraceptive pill, both of which influenced the ideological character of this cohort. Any account of generational formation that neglects these social and technological developments—focusing instead on endogenous population patterns—is therefore incomplete. It is vital to excavate the factors that underpin shifting birth-rates, rather than treating them as given.

Indeed, Baby Boomers are one of the only clear examples of a demographic overhaul coinciding with a distinct cultural identity. Millennials were not created by any correlative population spike, yet their alienation from older age-groups remains akin to what Boomers experienced in the 60s. For Milburn, this confirms Mannheim's thesis—outlined in his 1923 essay, 'The Problem of Generations'—that generations are produced by 'dynamic de-stabilization', or rapid historical change. A new, cohesive age category emerges when, 'as a result of an acceleration in the tempo of social and cultural transformation, basic attitudes must change so quickly that the latent, continuous adaptation and modification of traditional patterns of experience, thought and expression is no longer possible'. This explains why generations rarely conform to the cyclical 20 or 30-year timescales set out by sociologists. In periods of calm, young people inherit the existing worldview. When that stasis is disrupted, they coalesce around a different schema.

This coalescence takes place because the youth respond to transformative historical processes with an 'elasticity of mind'. Their relative lack of experience makes them susceptible to the 'moulding power of new situations', capable of aligning their perspective with altered realities, whereas their parents have built up a 'framework of useable past experience, so that every new experience has its form and its place largely marked out for it in advance'. Mannheim insists that this distinction does not make the young inherently progressive and the old incurably conservative. 'Youth and age . . . do not of themselves involve a definite intellectual or practical orientation; they merely initiate certain formal tendencies, the actual manifestations of which will ultimately depend on the prevailing social and cultural context'. Yet when we consider the 2008 financial crisis—and the austerity measures that flowed from it—there are obvious reasons why these tendencies produced a decisive leftward swing among teenagers and twentysomethings.

The bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, writes Milburn, was an earth-shattering Badiouian Event: 'a moment of sudden and unpredictable change that ruptures society's sense making'. By fracturing the neoliberal symbolic order, it called for the instatement of new Subjects and new Truths—for a political orientation beyond the tired fatalism of the 90s. This was a call that the young, 'lacking a solid interpretive prism formed of past

experience', were uniquely capable of answering. It was their responsibility to dismantle the 'entrepreneurial self' which Milburn sees as the linchpin of post-Fordist ideology. The primary objective of the Thatcher-Reagan programme, he argues, was not to push through economic reforms that favoured capital, but to deflate the communalist energies unlocked by the Keynesian settlement and replace them with a model of property-owning individualism. The cultural efflorescence of the 70s reflected an emerging horizon of possibility that was incompatible with capitalism itself. This utopian climate was destroyed by the doctrine of *There Is No Alternative*, which promoted 'investment in the self' over collective empowerment, as if societal futures had to close so that individual prospects could open. But it is precisely this belief in individual futurity that the Event of '08 belied, exposing major flaws in the system supposed to guarantee a profitable return on self-investment. Over the following years, young people watched their life chances crumble amidst the housing crisis, student loan debt and labour-market precaritization. The result was a transcendence of entrepreneurial ontology.

Milburn describes the 2008 meltdown as a 'passive event': 'something that happened to us' rather than something we participated in. Within six months it had 'disappeared behind the spectre of deficits in government budgets', and the onset of austerity compounded the impression that 'possibilities were closing down'. But while this feeling of disempowerment triggered far-right mobilizations amongst the youth of Eastern Europe, in other countries it yielded to the 'active events' of 2010-11: Occupy Wall Street in the US, the student movement in Britain, anti-austerity demonstrations in Western Europe, revolutionary upheavals in the Arab world. Each of these constituted a 'moment of excess' in which street-level activism allowed subjectivities to form outside of neoliberal logic. Despite the geographical and political differences between such moments, they shared a striking number of organizational forms, including democratic assemblies and consensus-based decision-making: a commonality that, for Milburn, speaks to a unified process of generational construction, developing common techniques in response to common problems.

His distinction between passive and active events makes effective use of Tronti's class composition theory. The crisis of 2008 was 'passive' because it revealed what Tronti called the 'technical composition' of the working class—their objective circumstances, defined by diminishing prospects and burgeoning debt. The frenetic activity of 2011, on the other hand, gave the proletariat its 'political composition': the methods and modalities evolved through struggle to overcome those circumstances. Age became 'one of the key modalities through which class is lived' because it was central to these post-crash insurrections, in which the youth—shaken out of their

complacency by the Event—escaped the neoliberal thought-world still populated by their elders.

Although these moments of excess proved ephemeral, they created a politicized generational unit that ‘stayed internally highly networked’, and regrouped in 2014–16 to initiate ‘the electoral turn’. Milburn surveys the rise (and, usually, fall) of party-political movements spearheaded by Generation Left in Greece, Spain, the US and the UK, suggesting—with a nod to the autonomist tradition—that the state suppression of the 2011 uprisings was what catalysed this switch from extra-parliamentary activism to electoral agitation. If Occupy could not withstand the power of the state, then the state itself had to be seized. Yet this project suffered from three intractable problems: it failed to form a viable electoral coalition with older generations; it was forced to work through institutions which sapped the participative spirit of 2011; and it remained vulnerable to a counter-attack by the forces of capital—the media and banking sectors in particular.

For Milburn, such barriers can only be surmounted when Generation Left redoubles its attempt to forge an anti-capitalist ethic which could radiate to older age brackets. The breakdown of entrepreneurial selfhood places young people in a ‘politically ambiguous’ position. ‘When the common sense of a society stops making sense but change through collective action seems out of reach, people must create ad hoc subjectivities from the material to hand’. This threatens to entrench the isolation instilled by neoliberalism. Disaffected with the dominant order, yet lacking a countercultural alternative, the youth may retreat into narcissistic self-pathologization, adopting psychotherapeutic discourses to create individual meanings in lieu of collective narratives. Milburn therefore calls for a ‘reinvention of adulthood’ that would complete Generation Left’s political composition by producing a stable, post-neoliberal subjectivity. The present conception of grown-upness, he claims, is closely linked to private property. Since the 1980s, adulthood has centred on ownership, of oneself and one’s home. Hence, the immediate task is to turn Generation Rent’s dispossession into a positive, ‘commons-based’ mode of living. ‘The most vital plank of any programme must be the massive expansion of cooperative housing and the spread of intergenerational co-housing’. There is no need to wait for a left government to take these steps: ‘Powerful solidarity networks and renters’ unions, in which participants pledge to back each other up over disputes with landlords and companies, can be built now’. The revolution in housing must be accompanied by the construction of a digital commons—one that harnesses the ‘sociality, self-expression, collective creation and autonomy’ permeating social media, yet wrests these energies away from predatory tech-giants. Finally, ‘collective practices of care’ must be developed to repair the damage done by unconstrained capital and inculcate forms of labour

that at least partially elude monetization, creating a shadow economy at odds with the ‘sociopathy of neoliberalism’. Through these solidaristic methods, Generation Left can increase its ability to act as a cohesive unit, and recalibrate adulthood to break with exploitation.

Milburn’s confidence that the radical youth could hegemonize the older generations—or at least ‘peel away a decisive minority’ of their members—echoes Mannheim’s assertion that a generational ‘entelechy’ can acquire enough force to represent the culture as a whole. Yet before the spirit of an age-group can become the spirit of the age, another process of hegemonization must take place; according to Mannheim, a self-conscious vanguard within the generation must impress its values upon a majority of its peers. Only when this forward-thinking faction has captured its ‘generational location’ can its views seep into society at large. A generation must be hegemonized by its internal vanguard before it can become a vanguard in itself. On the surface, voting patterns and opinion polls seem to reflect Milburn’s faith that this first stage of hegemony has been achieved: the under-25s are likely to support left parties and self-describe as socialists. But a closer look at the data makes one doubt whether the vanguard’s principles—say, the democratic socialism of Momentum or the DSA—have maintained their coherence among the broader swathes of Generation Left. For instance, a recent Gallup poll showed that while nearly 50 per cent of American millennials have a favourable image of ‘socialism’, almost as many have a positive view of ‘big business’, and 83 per cent look approvingly on ‘free enterprise’. When questioned on specific issues, this cohort’s ‘elasticity of mind’ sometimes sounds like fickleness. In Britain, a similar degree of ideological disorientation is evident in Generation Left’s uncritical endorsement of the EU (far more popular with young voters than Corbyn’s party), its disappointing turnout rate in 2019 (only 47 per cent), and its election of Keir Starmer as Labour leader.

So, if committed socialists are a sizeable faction within Generation Left rather than its overriding hegemon, what does this mean for Milburn’s account of the current generational divide? His exaggeration of Generation Left’s radical credentials is partly down to the conditions under which he was writing, before Corbynism capsized in December. But it is also a symptom of the book’s uneasy attempt to reconcile Badiou and Tronti. As we have seen, the Trontian categories of ‘technical composition’ and ‘political composition’ are mapped onto the ‘passive event’ of 2008 and the ‘active event’ of 2011. The first exposed systemic injustice, the second emboldened the young to confront it. Yet this splitting of the Event into discrete parts is a departure from Badiou, for whom the notion of a ‘passive event’ would be oxymoronic. In Badiou’s theory, Events create an instant expansion of political possibility by puncturing the ‘state’, or illusory consistency of the social world; they are

site-specific, rooted in a particular locality; they become Events when their participants designate them as such; and they carry a ‘maximal intensity of appearance’, asserting their presence through spectacle. It is hard to see how any of this applies to 2008, which was mostly invisible (occurring in abstract rather than concrete space), which had no mass participation, and which prompted an immediate foreclosure of possibility, allowing the state to reassert itself through the imposition of austerity.

In one way it is incidental whether the financial crash conforms to this exact definition: it does not affect the basic point that many young people moved leftward in its wake. But if we accept that 2008 was not an Event proper, then we will be better placed to understand why Milburn’s favoured generation has not yet reached a vanguardist position. For some, the galvanizing force of 2011 may have changed passivity into activity, disenchantment into engagement. But for many, the process of politicization has remained ‘passive’, in the sense that it has hinged on everyday frustrations—sky-high rent, gig economy work—which make the statements of Corbyn and Sanders particularly resonant. This process, in which mounting exasperation with one’s circumstances causes one to vote for the politician who empathizes with them, can be significant on a personal and electoral level; but it is a far cry from Badiou’s narrative of political subject-formation, in which a sudden and singular happening gives rise to a robust oppositional ideology, which then becomes an ‘object of faith’ for those who experienced the Event, and those who recognize the regime of Truth that it inaugurated.

This is, if you like, a problem with Generation Left’s political composition—the predominance of passive events has created ‘ad hoc’ and ‘ambiguous’ subjectivities, rather than revolutionary and Evental ones. But there is also an issue with its technical composition. Although Milburn is adept at showing how ‘political generations are intimately entwined with the dynamics of class struggle’, he overlooks the instability of Generation Left’s class coalition. This is, after all, a category that includes the offspring of bankers and cleaners, schoolteachers and stockbrokers. It is riven with inequality. Yet its distinct elements are more or less politically aligned because even affluent 21-year-olds experience economic pressures, like rent and debt, that expose the sham of neoliberal subjecthood. Millennials can therefore be described as a ‘populist’ grouping, according to the definition set out by Michael Denning in *NLR* 122: an alliance of disparate social forces which come together around ‘livelihood struggles’, or non-wage-based forms of exploitation. Livelihood struggles have a socially equalizing effect that enables the political unification of structurally antagonistic actors. But how long this unity will last is indeterminate. For Generation Left, it could be unravelled by political changes that re-orient struggle away from these

'subordinate' forms, or by the unequal distribution of inherited wealth, which will propel some young people onto the property ladder while others continue renting.

By neglecting these contingencies, Milburn risks replacing class politics with progressivism. His homogeneous depiction of Generation Left as a culturally advanced agent elides the complexities of its material composition. Socio-economic data on this age-group is supplanted by the murkier discourse of subjectivity. As such, he is more interested in honing a certain cultural identity (through experiments in communal living), than building cross-generational solidarity among proletarianized classes. This is not to say that Milburn's inspiring programme for a new 'commons' should be dismissed. On the contrary, to understand Generation Left as an unstable populist coalition increases the urgency of this project. For if the material basis of its radicalism remains fragile, that is all the more reason to engender new material realities—through the proliferation of cooperatives and care-work. If its egalitarianism is still conjectural, that should encourage us to embed it in lived experience, via community organizing and participatory democracy. Such street-level exercises could become the concrete embodiment of Generation Left's abstract commitment. They could generate a new symbolic order without the intervention of a messianic Event. Yet they should always be coupled with a class consciousness that grasps the volatility of generational politics—the potential for its populist reason to erode—and reaches out to older age-groups, not by inviting them into our 'post-capitalist' world, but by stressing the common depredations of the world we all inhabit.