

A Critique of the Millennial: A Retreat from and Return to Class

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ABSTRACT: Since the turn of the millennium, millions of people born between the late 1970s and the late 1990s have been categorized as “millennials.” A media discourse tells people what a millennial is and is not, shaping how those people it depicts as “millennial” may perceive themselves and how others perceive them. This paper examines four media representations of the millennial: a member of a youth cohort, a consumer, a worker to be managed, and an immiserated victim of hard times. It argues that these four media representations of the millennial distort the capitalist determinations of millennial life and labour and prevent the millennials from seeing themselves as part of the working class. By way of a critique of these four ideological media representations of the class-less millennial, the paper forwards a historical-materialist account of the millennial working class in a new capitalist millennium.

KEYWORDS: Millennial, Capitalism, Class Analysis, Youth, Media, Ideology

INTRODUCTION: THE MILLENNIAL SIGN AS SITE OF STRUGGLE

Since the turn of the millennium, scholars, journalists and marketing consultants have categorized millions of people born between the late 1970s and the late 1990s as “millennials” (Dorsey, 2014; Pew Research, 2014; Reason-Rupe, 2014; Stein, 2013; Howe and Strauss 2000). Books, news articles, TV clips, websites, documentaries, polls and public conversations add to an already large and growing media discourse on the millennial identity. Everyone from Obama to Nike to Google Analytics has taken part in the “recognition” of the millennial, which is one more identity on a big list of media generated identities that governments,

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corporations and marketing firms use to talk about youth or the “spirit of the age.” Whether championing the millennial as the early twenty-first century’s winner or ridiculing the millennial as its biggest loser, numerous people take part in the construction of this “new” youth identity. Images of and messages about the millennial flow through the media, showing and telling people what a millennial is, and is not, and shaping how those they address as “millennials” may perceive their identities in society.

This paper analyzes four ways that the media represents the millennial identity: a member of a youth cohort, a sovereign consumer, a worker to be managed, and an immiserated victim of hard times. It argues that these four media representations of the millennial distort the capitalist determinations of millennial life and labour and may prevent millennials from seeing themselves as part of the working class. Through a critique of these four media representations of the class-less millennial, I forward a historical-materialist account of the millennial as working class in a new capitalist millennium.

This paper’s analysis of media representations of the millennial identity intervenes in current semiotic and political struggles over the meaning of the millennial in twenty-first century capitalist society. The “millennial” is a sign for an identity that the organic intellectuals, movements and parties of the Left and Right articulate to their projects as they struggle for hegemony (or “moral leadership”) in society (Gramsci, 1971). The Russian linguist Valentin Voloshinov (1973) conceptualized words as “signs” that social classes fight to narrow (make “uni-accentual”) or broaden (make “multi-accentual”) as they struggle for political power. Extending Voloshinov’s account of the role of language in class struggle, the late Stuart Hall (1982, 70) argued that signs “enter into controversial and conflicting social issues as a real and positive social force, affecting their outcomes” and that signs are part of “what has to be struggled over,” for they are part of the “means by which collective social understandings are created – and thus the means by which consent for particular outcomes can be effectively mobilized.”

At present, the millennial sign is fought over by liberals and conservatives who think and write about the world within the normative boundaries of liberal capitalist ideology. Liberals and conservatives battle to win the “hearts and minds” of millennials by articulating the millennial “interest” to their own, linking millennial identity to their political identity and reducing the millennial worldview to the precepts of their ideology. Liberals, for example, gush at the prospect of the

millennial being “Our Liberal Future”(Chait, 2012) while conservatives say that the “Millennial Generation is Abandoning Liberalism”(Street, 2013) and “May Grow Up More Conservative”(Leonhardt, 2014).

The Left, however, has largely remained on the sidelines of the struggle over the millennial sign. This is too bad given that forty two-percent of millennials recently polled say they prefer socialism to capitalism as a means of organizing society but only sixteen percent understand what that really means (Harris, 2014). The goal of this paper is to intervene in the battle over the millennial sign. It critiques some dominant media representations of the millennial and sheds light on the capitalist determinations that shape the circumstances of the millennial as working class. By doing so, I assert the continued salience of class analysis in spite of decades of its forced retreat (Wood, 1999).

Panitch and Leys (2000, vii-viii) observe how “class analysis as a mode of intellectual discourse, and social class as the pivotal axis of political mobilization, have both suffered marginalization, although certainly not complete collapse, in the face of the casualization of work, trade-union decline and the fracturing of socialist political formations, not to mention the impact of neoliberal and post-modernist ideas.” Despite the stultification of class analysis by neoliberal academics, capitalism lumbers forward, and with it, class divisions, conflicts and inequalities. So long as capitalism exists, class will persist as a fact of society and site of analysis. Palmer (2014, 57) says it is “imperative that those on the socialist left – as well as those working in unions, social movements, and all matter of campaigns that see themselves challenging capital and the state in the interests of the dispossessed – reassert what is most solid in the Marxist tradition,” that being, “a politics of class that speaks directly to the betterment of humanity through insistence that the expropriated are as one in their ultimate needs.” This paper supports this praxis, but does so without illusion and with some qualification. The following section elaborates upon this point by defining some key terms, capitalism and the working class in particular.

CAPITALISM, THE WORKING CLASS, MEDIA AND IDEOLOGY

The capitalist system divides people into two antagonistic classes: the owning class (the minority chief executive officers and shareholders who control corporations) and the working class (the majority of people who must sell their labour to corporations in exchange for the wages they depend on to live). In capitalism, workers enter the market and sell

their labour power – the manual and cognitive capabilities required to do tasks – to corporations as a commodity in exchange for the wage they need to meet their basic needs and cultural wants. In the absence of a “basic income” and advanced welfare state, capitalism “proletarianizes” the great majority of people, meaning that it makes them dependent on the wage relation to live and the “silent compulsion of economic relations” (Marx, 1959). In factories and call centres, fast-food restaurants and cafes, mega-malls and boutique retail stores, condo build sites and video game studios, a diversity of people must try to sell their capacity to work in exchange for a wage. The market exchange relationship between workers and corporations appears to be “free” (because there is no direct coercion) and “equal” (because workers and corporations meet in the market as sellers and buyers of labour).

Yet, this apparently “free” and “equal” exchange relationship mystifies the substantive un-freedom of work (i.e. corporations try to control the worker’s labour process) and the unequal outcome (i.e. the corporation exploits the worker’s labour power to enrich its owning class of executives and shareholders). In the capitalist system, the goal of all corporations is profit and to make it, they bring money, technology, media, and hundreds (if not thousands) of waged workers together into productive social relations. In pursuit of profit, corporations try to sell what they produce for more than what they pay their workers. Profit is the difference between the value the corporation takes from selling commodities and the value it pays workers to make them. In capitalism, owners try to squeeze more value from workers than they return to them as wages; workers sometimes respond and resist the terms of their exploitation through acts of solidarity and struggle.

In capitalism, being “working class” is not a lifestyle choice or a performance of the self, but a rudimentary social relation experienced by millions of different people who do not own the means of production and for that reason, must sell their labour power to those that do in exchange for the wage they need to live. Capitalism makes a working class “in-itself” (i.e. people that sell their labour power to corporations for a wage), but it does not necessarily make a working class “for-itself” (i.e. people that identify themselves as being in opposition to capitalism and as having interests distinct from corporations). The people that sell their labour to the Target retail store, for example, are part of a working class in-itself. But there is no guarantee that Target’s employees will act as a class for-itself by taking up a fight for workplace democracy, job security or benefits. As Gindin (2010) says, “There’s nothing inherently radical

about the working class. It just has the potential to be radical”(cited in Lilley, 2010). Though the wage relation is common to most working people, it does not necessarily foster in each worker a revolutionary consciousness about the perils of capitalism or automatically inspire in them an “interest” to move beyond it.

In the twenty-first century, more people are proletarianized than ever before due to the universalization of the wage relation, but the convergences and divergences of exploitation and the oppressions of racism, sexism, ableism and more mean the wage relation is experienced differently (Coburn, 2014). Also, the worker’s identity (their sense of who they are and who they are not) and interest (their sense of what issue matters most to them and what cause they are committed to) do not mechanically spring from the wage relation, but are socially and discursively constructed by big organizations (i.e. governments, parties, corporations, media firms, organized religion, unions) and their discourses (laws, policies, doctrines, stories, press releases, ads) as they are transmitted from one historical period to the next (Hall, 1995). Identities and interests carried over from the past shape those available to working people in the present, but they can be transformed.

In twenty-first century late-capitalist, postmodern-consumerist and multicultural societies like Canada and the United States, working people embody and experience their identities in and across a range of contextually defined and shifting social roles. A worker’s identity is shaped by and shaping of a combination of salient social factors: place (i.e. “Torontonians” for or against the Ford Nation), age (i.e. Boomers or Millennials), “race” (black power or white power), ethnicity (proud Poles or proud Germans), nationality (Canadian or American), sport (British or Brazilian football fans), diet (meat lover or vegan), gender (macho-man or metropolitan metrosexual), sexual preference (heterosexual or LGBTQ), religion (Islam or Judaism), consumerism (Nike or Reebok loyal), political ideology (liberal or conservative), lifestyle (sedentary or active), nationality (Chinese or American), fandom (Kanye West or Drake), occupation (Day Maintenance Associate at Wal-Mart or Apple Family Room specialist at the Apple Retail Store) and more. These are but a few of the scraps of self that may constitute a worker’s identity and which workers embody and live in their hearts and minds, sometimes fleetingly, sometimes, forever. None of these *essentially* link with anti-capitalism or the politics of socialist struggle.

So, though the working class in-itself exists (waged labour and exploitation is a fact of capitalism), the working class for itself (workers

that recognize their interest to be in conflict with capitalism and unite to move beyond it) always haunts the capitalist system but infrequently takes material form. Save moments and movements in periods of prolonged crisis and upheaval, the working class is most often dis-united. The “working class” *ought* to be one for itself, but most of the time, it is not. The working class’s identity politics and the ways that workers of the world identify themselves and their interests are not consonant or predictable, but contradictory and fluid. The working class is made and unmade in tandem with capitalist transformations, State formations and initiatives, wars of maneuver and of position, the clash of ideologies and the cycles and circuits of struggle.

The media and culture industries play a significant role in making and unmaking the working class. These industries are at once profit-seeking firms and a powerful means of representing the social world. “[T]he communications industries play a central double role in modern societies, as industries in their own right and as the major site of the representations and arenas of debate through which the overall system is imagined and argued over” (Wasko, Murdock and Sousa, 2011, 2). The media industries are a major source of the representations of the world which express and shape how people think about the world, their identities and those of others (Dines and Humez, 2011; Kellner, 1995). Books, magazines, newspapers, bulletins, podcasts, radio broadcasts, Hollywood films, TV shows, ads, websites and video games convey representations of the world that address and shape how people come to perceive the world and what it means to be an owner or a worker, rich or poor, man or woman, white or black, adult or youth, Us or Them. In pursuit of profit, the media industries try to inform and entertain, but in doing so, they play a powerful role in socializing people; they often construct and normalize certain ways of being, thinking and acting that align with capitalism while denying and stigmatizing anti-capitalism.

By taking part in the social construction of reality, the media industries and their many representations of society may shape, in significant ways, how workers perceive capitalism and their place in it. Media representations might reveal or conceal the conditions of capitalism – the hierarchical class structure, the class division and the class conflicts. They might also recognize or deny the existence of a working class (in and for itself) and encourage or discourage people to see themselves as part of it. The meaning of the working class is “constituted within, not outside of representation” (Hall, 1995, 4) and media representations “provide the materials out of which many people construct their sense of

class" (Kellner, 1995, 1). Indeed, the media industries have the power to frame the working class in positive or negative terms by representing it as a source of pride or shame, empowerment or disempowerment, ossification or transformation. Overall, the media is an important site where working class identities are formed and deformed, where people's understanding of their place in society takes shape and where dominant norms, beliefs and values about what a worker should expect or demand from a life of waged labour can be affirmed or opposed.

The North American media industries – the vertically and horizontally integrated conglomerates that own the dominant means of producing media representations in society – underrepresent the working class. Many media products abnegate the working class by portraying everyone as part of an expansive and upwardly mobile "middle-class" society in which no class antagonism exists (Kendall, 2004; Zweig, 2000). Some fetishistically over-represent people as consumers and under-represent them as workers, emphasizing the sphere of consumption and hiding the abode of production. Others render the working class invisible by glorifying and making role models out of the lives and lifestyles of the system's rich, privileged and powerful. When media products do address social class, they often stereotype working people as being inherently wasteful, ignorant, angry, childish and tasteless (Butsch, 2003; Kendall, 2004; Skeggs, 2004; Zweig, 2000). In sum, media conglomerates and media products often deprive viewers of the ability to see themselves in positive terms as a working class with an outlook and interest different from capitalism and its owners. Media firms repackage and sell partial and selective images of and messages about already existing identities that are aligned with the status quo to resonate with the "common sense" of viewers and reproduce capitalist ideology.

When media corporations produce and sell media products that conceal the real social relations of the capitalist system – class divisions between owners and workers, structurally antagonistic class interests and the ebb and flow of class struggles – they uphold the ideology of the system and its rulers. The media commodities that under-represent and misrepresent real capitalist social relations are "ideological" because they carry misleading and false ideas about the essence of the system. That said, in periods typified by crisis, media firms may produce and sell goods that convey real representations of capitalist social relations which unsettle ideology and express opposition to it.

Now that I've posited a historical materialist conceptualization of capitalism, the working class, the media industries and ideology, I turn

to examining the media-generated discourse about “the millennial.” Do media representations of the millennial help the young people they address as millennials understand the real capitalist social relations that shape their present circumstances? Do media claims and statements about the millennial hold a mirror to capitalist logics or distort them? Do they support or undermine the formation of a millennial working class, in and for itself? In what follows, I highlight and analyze four significant media representations of the millennial that seem to float above the capitalist forces and relations that act upon it and the youthful bodies it possesses. I critique these media representations and show how they distort real capitalist social relations and may prevent millennials from seeing themselves as part of the working class.

THE MILLENNIAL AS A MEMBER OF A YOUTH COHORT

One way the media represents the “millennial” is as a person born in a certain period of time, as a member of a cohort. According to some millennial authorities, a millennial is someone (anyone) born between 1977 and 1995 (Dorsey, 2014). Other “experts” say the “millennial” period of incubation spans from 1982 to 2001 (Howe and Strauss, 2000). Most millennial specialists, however, do not clearly explain what the special social significance of the space between these two moments in historical time is for the formation of the millennial’s identity, why it has been selected as a period or how. One wonders what two big events bookended these moments. Was it Deng Xiaoping’s readiness to forge “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and the OJ Simpson trial? Perhaps it was the 1982 U.S. embargo on Libya’s petroleum imports and the 9/11 terrorist attack? Many of the authors who routinely depict every person born at some point in this ill-defined period as belonging to a big group whose common characteristics are different from those exhibited by other cohorts do not seem to care much for careful signposting. Some purveyors of millennial discourse, then, presume that a common birth period spanning two decades or so gives people a common identity and set of traits that are unlike those of people born into other periods. Hence, the millennial is different from “Gen Xers” (people born between the mid-1960s to late 1970s) and those labelled “Baby Boomers” (people born between the mid-1940s and mid-1960s) because they “came to be” and “came of age” in the period they did. Commonality of birth period is said to unite millions of people as millennials, cement together their

ideas and practices, and ultimately divide them from the Gen Xers and the Boomers.

History matters to the making of identities, no doubt. But what's missing from media discourse on the millennial identity is any sense that the history which makes it moves due to cycles of struggle between protagonists (the workers of the world) and antagonists (the global rich, the 1 percent). By representing the millennial as a member of a cohort defined by period of birth, not by class relations, the media obscures capitalism's class divide. It is as if the Silicon Valley-dwelling, Facebook owning and conservative-cause supporting billionaire Mark Zuckerberg and the queer, black and waged worker at the H&M down at the local mall have everything in common, more so than say Zuckerberg and Google-owner Larry Page, just because they were born in the 1980s and likely watched *The Cosby Show*. By defining age as the thing that unites and divides people, millennial media discourse distorts the substantive division between owning and working class millennials.

Yet, a division exists. Ruling class millennials, for example, include Perenna Kei (worth \$1.3 billion), Duston Moskovitz (worth \$6.8 billion), Mark Zuckerberg (worth \$28.5 billion), Anton Kathrein (\$1.35 billion), Drew Houston (\$1.2 billion), Scott Duncan (\$6.3 billion), Yang Huiyan (\$6.9 billion), Fahd Hariri (\$1.2 billion), Robert Pera (\$2.7 billion), Julia Oetker (\$1.65 billion), and Marie Besnier Beauvalot (\$2.7 billion) (Mac, 2014). 1 percent of the millennials under thirty-two years old who control \$1 million or more do so because this wealth was handed down to them by their rich parents (O'Donnel, 2013). Over the next two decades, the millennial kids of the 1 percent super-rich Boomers and Xers are set to inherit about \$15 trillion (Donovan, 2014), which will further solidify an oligarchic class structure and exacerbate the indisputable problem of class inequality. In twenty-first century capitalism, a millennial owning class minority and working class majority exists. But the media representation of the millennial obscures class division within this cohort and substitutes generational conflict for class conflict, pitting "the young" against "the old" and "the old" against "the middle-aged." It hides the growing gap between the inter-generational owning and working classes and how *all* workers – Boomers, Xers, Millennials – live in a class divided society.

Capitalism's class divide is growing. One percent of the world's population controls forty percent of the world's total wealth, the eighty-five richest people in the world control more wealth than the nearly 3.5 billion people who belong to the poorest half of the population, the

400 richest Americans own more assets than the poorest 150 million combined, the top one per cent of U.S. households controls about twenty-three percent of the nation's total income and the average U.S. chief executive (CEO) is paid approximately three-hundred and thirty times more than the U.S. worker (Cassidy, 2014; Olive, 2014; Picketty, 2014). Two hundred and twenty five million people are unemployed, wages as a percent of GDP are at an all-time low while profits as a percentage of GDP are at an all-time high and one in three people on the planet are poor, barely able to meet their basic needs (Common Dreams, 2012).

Between the early 1980s and 2010, the wealth of Canada's ruling elite grew and now, the nation's 1 percent accumulates at least 10 times more than the typical worker. In 1980, the ratio of pay for Canadian chief executive officers vs. frontline workers was 20:1; in 2013, it was 171: 1 (Olive, 2014). In 2013, the 100 highest-paid CEOs in Canada took home a total of \$7.9 million, each making about 171 times more than what they paid workers (Olive, 2014). In 2012, Canadian Pacific Railway CEO Hunter Harrison received \$49.2 million; Thomson Reuters CEO James Smith got \$18.8 million; Talisman Energy CEO John Manzoni collected \$18.7 million; Eldorado Gold Corp CEO Paul Wright accumulated \$18.7 million; Magna CEO Donald Walker absorbed \$16.9 million; Open Text Corp CEO Mark Barrenechea took \$14.8 million; Royal Bank of Canada CEO Gordon Nixon, \$13.7 million; Onex Corp CEO Gerald Schwarz, \$13.3 million; and, Catamaran Corp CEO Mark Thierer, \$12.9 million. The top ten highest-paid CEOs in Canada accumulated a total of \$177 million dollars in 2012, a sum larger than what is earned by a small town of about 10,000 median waged workers.

Capitalist history, not abstract time, is what makes the millennial working class. As Marx (1852) might put it, the millennials "make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." The millennial working class lives and works alongside previous generations of workers in a class divided society, but it came to be in a set of circumstances that were slightly different from those which were endured by their parents and their parents. The millennial "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1977) was crystallized in a period of time not exactly like the one experienced by the "Gen Xers" and the "Boomers." The millennials did not live through the radicalizing upheavals of the 60s or grow up feeling that the revolution was around the corner. They were not alive during the Keynesian welfare state's highpoint and the "class compromise" from which the energies

of the 1960s exploded into different political formations. They did not face the onset of neoliberal restructuring in the mid-1970s or know that they came of age as this ruling “class project” took off (Harvey, 2007). The millennial working class came to be in circumstances shaped by the effects of major economic transformations, state policies and ideologies that its members did not choose, but inherited. Though shaped by capitalist conditions, the millennial working class has the power to change them in solidarity with other cohorts, young and old.

THE MILLENNIAL AS A SOVEREIGN CONSUMER

A second significant way the media represents the millennial is as a consumer of commodities and services (Business, 2013; Hoffmann, 2014; Ray, 2014). Since the 1950s, capital’s mind management corps have mined, co-opted and integrated the trends, styles and mannerisms of youth culture into their selling campaigns. Today, marketing, advertising and promotional relations firms – the combined promotional industries – frame the millennial subject as a consumer of the goods and services sold by their corporate clients. In “Here is Everything You Need to Know About the Millennial Consumer,” Hoffmann (2014) describes the millennial consumer’s characteristics. Millennials are said to constitute 27 percent of the U.S. consumer market and “are more diverse than any previous generation.” This multi-cultural millennial is a “digital native” (i.e. they grew up with new technology) and a proactive consumer (i.e. they search for tips about what to buy from friends, partners, parents and websites). The millennial consumer is networked at all times, uses the Internet to browse for commodities and presumably wants to be targeted with sales pitches for goods via Facebook, Twitter and all kinds of social media platforms and digital devices. In *Marketing to Millennials: Reach the Largest and Most Influential Generation of Consumers Ever* (2013), Barkely Advertising’s Executive Vice President Jeff Fromm and his lawyer co-author, Christie Garton, affix some other traits to the millennial consumer. They claim that “80 million members of the millennial generation (born 1977 to 1995) represent over 25% of the U.S. population and more than \$200 billion in annual buying power.” They say the millennial consumer values social networking, isn’t shy about sharing opinions, is a prosumer who likes to participate in product development and marketing, expects and demands authenticity and transparency from companies and is a tastemaker, effective at swaying and shaping the shopping habits of others. Promoting their book, Fromm and Barton (2013) explain how marketing companies can build the “trust and

loyalty” of the millennial consumer and “persuade” it to buy what their clients sell.

This media representation of the millennial as consumer is typical in a capitalist system which depends for its survival on the ideological reproduction of consumerism as the dominant way of life. In the capitalist system, corporations produce an abundance of commodified goods and services for market exchange (and profit), not for social use (or human need). But no one corporation can guarantee in advance of circulation how many of their commodities will be consumed or how much profit they will make as result. To increase the prospect of maximal commodities being consumed and optimal profit realized, corporations spend a tremendous amount of money on promotional campaigns that try to persuade people to desire what they sell (Sweezy and Baran, 1966). In the early twentieth century, the promotional industries –advertising, marketing and PR – developed to service capitalism’s consumer cultivation imperative (Ewen, 1996). In the twenty-first century, the “sales effort” still performs a crucial consumer-demand management function for the corporations that rule the market. “Consumer spending in today’s economy, dominated by giant firms, is significantly dependent on the sales effort, i.e., marketing as a whole, with advertising as its most conspicuous form”(Holleman, Stole, Bellamy-Foster and McChesney, 2011).

The identity and interest forming promotional industries are not in the business of making ads that reflect existing consumer wants for commodities but are instead paid by the captains of industry to engineer images of “what people need and must have” to sustain massive “waves of enthusiasm” for commodities (Debord, 1994). Manufacturing and managing the consumer and the commodity spectacle is what keeps the promotional sector profitable. The promotional firms are paid to differentiate the images of their client’s commodities from the images that rival firms attach to the goods and services sold by others. They design, for example, the brand images which aim to differentiate Tim Horton’s from Starbucks, McDonalds from Wendy’s, Apple from Samsung and Nike from Reebok. In 2013, U.S. corporations collectively spent about \$140.2 billion on multi-media marketing campaigns to manage consumer wants for well-crafted brand images (Kantar Media, 2014). In that same year, Apple spent \$662 million, Samsung spent \$597 million and Microsoft spent \$493 million to get people to buy the images of their technology (Advertising Age, 2013). In capitalism, the very corporations that produce “want” pay other corporations to define what the want is

and convince consumers to pay for its image. Consumers do not decide what corporations make or sell, nor do they always know exactly what they want from corporations in advance of the spectacular campaigns that tell them what to want and what the meaning of their want is.

Though dubious, the media representation of the millennial as an empowered consumer aligns perfectly with neoliberal-capitalist ideology's champion and hero, the "sovereign consumer." Neoliberal authors posit that human freedom is best advanced by the maximization of business freedoms within a state characterized by property rights, free markets and free trade. For free-market fundamentalists, to be free is to be a sovereign consumer and to be a sovereign consumer is to rationally choose what commodity one wants, when one wants it, from a "free" marketplace (Harvey, 2007; Hutt, 1940; Tucker, 2004; von Hayek, 2007). The media represents the millennial as a sovereign consumer in a free-market that reflects their every demand with a commodity supply. The hipster millennial wants a quizzical hamburger: Wendy's launches the "Pretzel Bacon Cheeseburger"; the health conscious millennial wants low calorie fast food: McDonald's releases the McWrap; the millennial college student wants a big box store: Wall-Mart builds on-campus (Thrasher, 2013).

Corporations use the idea of millennial consumer "demand" to rationalize the quarterly roll out of new products and to make millennials collectively feel as though they are really in control of the marketplace (when they are not). By representing each new commodity in the marketplace as reflective of millennial demand, the media makes the millennial consumer appear to have decision-making powers comparable to a CEO. As if Apple Inc. discovered a collective millennial desire for the Apple iPad in 2009 and that this is what inspired Steve Jobs to announce the iPad's global launch in 2010. In reality, most commodities available in the marketplace are chosen by corporate decision-makers far in advance (and in anticipation) of the millennial consumer's "choice." Millennials do select commodities to consume (from hundreds upon thousands of available selections), but corporations possess the power choose what commodities actually get made as "selections." Though consumer demand matters to corporations, it is not the primary cause of the capitalist process through which they research and develop, manufacture and bring things and services into the world as commodities. The corporate imperative to expand operations in pursuit of profit on behalf of shareholders is what maintains the ongoing production of "new" commodities. The capitalist goal of ensuring people will buy these

commodities is what buttresses the growth of the promotional industries and their management of millennial consumer want.

In addition to perpetuating the myth of the sovereign consumer, the media representation of the millennial consumer is deeply classist. To make “free” market choices, the millennial must first have money to spend, but not all millennials possess the same amount of money due to the class system. In fact, the media’s ideal-type multicultural, smartphone-owning and brand-conscious millennial panders to the already wealthy millennials who have the new technology, the Internet access, the digital literacy skills, the time and the money to shop for and consume commodities. The millennial consumer depicted in the corporate mediascape is a hybrid, urban, tech-savvy, college-educated and “middle class” hipster, never a rural and racialized poor person who cannot afford an iPad, who is deprived of a computer and Internet connection and who struggles to earn a college degree in the time left over after working flex-time shifts for a meager wage in the service sector. The consumer market includes and excludes and targets and ignores millennials based upon their ability to pay.

In addition to being classist, the media’s millennial consumer hides the human source of the commodities available in the market: the bodies and minds of millions of waged workers. The image of the North American millennial as a free and equal consumer in a marketplace of branded commodities made just for them conceals how corporations exploit young waged workers all over the world. Furthermore, the media representation of the millennial consumer erases half of the millennial’s waking life by encouraging them to see themselves as *only* consumers. To consume, most millennials must work, but the media representation of the millennial as only a consumer conceals the waged work the millennial must endure to acquire the money they need to buy the branded commodities they have been taught by the spectacle to want. The American Eagle slacks, the Olive Garden salad bar, the Smirnoff mickey, the Apple iPad and Tiffany pearl broach cost money and to get it, the millennial must sell a piece of themselves to a corporation. Through this exchange relationship, the millennial gets some of the cash they need to buy status commodities, but loses a piece of their being in the process.

The dispossessions and sorrows of millennial work (waged and unwaged) are many: deference to management’s control over embodied emotions; the “one best way” of speaking customer service scripts, all day; the psychological drain and physical strain of labouring with one’s

heart and mind to personify the company's "brand promise"; flexibly coming together with others in projects that quickly fall apart and do not reflect one's true passions; virtually working round the clock, tethered to technologies that collapse pre-existing boundaries between labour-time and leisure-time, work and home. Work in capitalism wears the millennial down, but the promotional industries motivate the millennial to keep slogging away at it in exchange for the engineered promises of consumerism.

The media representation of the millennial as a consumer conceals the capitalist dispossessions and degradations of waged work but is nonetheless functional to the reproduction of the capitalist circuit. This representation teaches the millennial to see their freedom in the marketplace, not the work-space (the freedom to consume perhaps makes the unfreedom of work bearable); it encourages the millennial to view their means to change the world as the marketplace, not the state ("vote with your dollars" for the best corporate brand, not for a party that best represents your class interests); it gets millennials to view their common interest in lifestyle niche markets, not pro-worker organizations (mobilize with fellow shoppers to lobby for bargains, forget about class solidarity, collective bargaining and political demands). Overall, the millennial-as-consumer hides the millennial-as-worker and closes down yet another space in society for the millennial to see themselves as part of a working class with interests non-identical to the mall.

THE MILLENNIAL AS A WORKER TO BE MANAGED

A third way the media represents the millennial is as a worker, but one that is an object of modern management (Ashkenas, 2014; Bradt, 2014; Espinoza, Ukleja and Rusch, 2010; Heathfield, 2014; Lancaster and Stillman, 2010; O'Malley, 2014; Sannelli, 2014). This media representation depicts the millennial as a "young worker" whose ethos poses all kinds of opportunities and challenges for HR departments. For example, in *Managing the Millennials: Discover the Core Competencies for Managing Today's Workforce*, Espinoza, Ukleja and Rusch (2010) describe the work habits and values of the millennial to provide "managers of all ages with specific recommendations and tools for engaging this burgeoning demographic – some 78 million strong." In *The M-Factor: How the Millennial Generation is Rocking the Workplace*, Lancaster and Stillman (2010) profess to offer "the definitive guide to Millennials in the workplace – what they want, how they think, and how to unlock their talents to your

organization's advantage." In *Motivating the "What's in it For Me" Workforce: Manage Across the Generational Divide and Increase Profits*, Marston (2007) explains how managers can motivate the millennial to help their corporation "achieve peak performance" and "organizational success" so they "can get more out of every worker, no matter their age and attitude." Moore (2014) says the millennial worker holds "a postmodern worldview, which is quite different from the generations before" and encourages managers to "better understand the postmodern worldview to effectively work with millennials."

In some accounts, the millennial worker is a value-added benefit to business operations. Equipped with a smart phone and always connected by the Internet to a virtual network of cosmopolitan, civically-minded and multi-cultural "friends," the millennial helps corporations to compete in a fast-changing and global marketplace by pioneering new-fangled customer service models, collaboratively solving efficiency problems and innovating new products (Burstein, 2013; Fuscaldò, 2014). In others, the millennial is a problem, a slacker who undermines corporate performance. Distracted by the instant gratifications of Web 2.0, obsessed with brand images, coddled by helicopter parents and willfully under-performing, the millennial is a lazy, entitled, selfish, atomized and disengaged worker (Stampler, 2013). As a boon or burden to capital, the millennial is a worker that exists as a reified object, a resource to be managed in ways that align with a firm's profit goals.

This managerial-manufactured media representation of the millennial as a manageable worker reflects the fact that in capitalism, owners do rely on human relations experts and consultants to run their operations. In early twentieth century capitalism, owners hired engineers, Fredrick W. Taylor being the most renowned, to figure out how to control how workers worked (Noble, 1977). Taylor said that owners could increase production efficiencies by studying the worker's labour process in minute detail, determining the one best way to do a job and then imposing this standard upon workers. Taylor's "Scientific Management" tried to maximize the productivity of workers by increasing their "efficiency" with strategies that aimed to standardize and speed up work (Noble, 1984). By advising managers to break down production into small and repetitive steps, Taylorism divorced the conceptualization of the work process from the workers themselves and put it in the control of managers. By standardizing the steps in each production process, Taylorism made it possible for managers to easily train workers, thereby undermining their skill set and bargaining power. Taylorism taught owners that the labour

process could be engineered and that workers could be replaced, just like the machines that workers used to assemble goods (Braverman, 1974).

Taylorism persists in many millennial-filled workplaces such as McDonalds (Ritzer, 2009), but this Fordist and hierarchical managerial strategy of control exists alongside a post-Fordist and vertical managerial strategy that aims to get workers to coordinate their own exploitation. In the nominally “humane workplaces” of the New Economy, managers recognize each worker’s unique identity and enable them to express their feelings and contribute to decision-making (Ross, 2004). By encouraging individualized acts of task-mastering and autonomy, managers deter workers from uniting as a class for itself and fighting for more just workplaces. In postmodern management theory and practice, this “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) gets millennial workers to superintend their own dispossession. Self-actualization occurs through self-exploitation and freedom is attained by subordinating oneself to more tasks. This mode of capitalist governance encourages workers to loathe themselves, not the system, for their plight. As a tool of the owning class, management takes sides in class struggles.

Yet, the media representation of the millennial as a worker to be managed makes management seem benign, even class neutral. A well-managed corporation seems to support a win-win situation for millennial CEOs, managers and workers alike. This sanguine view of the power relationship between managers and workers downplays the often intense conflicts between management and workers and the fact that the outcome of a well-managed organization can lead to a win-lose situation, with managers and CEOs being the winners and workers, the losers. For example, a manager may have an interest in getting the millennial worker to work harder and faster for little pay so as to maximize their productivity and add to the overall profit margins of their organization; the worker may have an interest in working at a pace they determine and feel comfortable with and for as much pay as possible to enhance their quality of work and life. The amount of pay a millennial gets for their work, the amount of time they must work to get paid, and the way they think and act at work are all sites of contention, negotiation and struggle.

But these sources of class conflict don’t appear in the made-to-be-managed media representation of the millennial. Instead, media discourse on the managed millennial focuses on solving the problem of a supposed “generational conflict” in the workplace between the millennial, Gen Xer and Boomer workers. The PR for Lancaster’s (2003)

When Generations Collide: Who They Are. Why They Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work, for example, declares the workplace to be “a battle zone” where “colleagues sometimes act like adversaries” and “generations glare at one another across the conference table” in a blitz of “conflict and confusion.” This ad copy for the book says that “eighty million Baby Boomers vacillate between their overwhelming need to succeed and their growing desire to slow down and enjoy life,” Gen Xers “try to prove themselves constantly yet dislike the image of being overly ambitious, disrespectful, and irreverent” and Millennials “mix savvy with social conscience and promise to further change the business landscape.” Here, workplace conflict arises from cohorts, not social classes; class conflicts between owners and workers of all ages over the terms of work are invisible.

Furthermore, the media representation of the millennial as an object of management effaces the continuing intersections of sexualized and racialized class inequality and oppression within the twenty-first century workplace. Of all the CEOs currently running Fortune 500 hundred companies, six are African-American (1.2 percent), nine are Asian (1.8 percent), eight are Latin (1.6 percent) and 23 are women (4.6 percent) (Zweignenhalf, 2013). Though a rainbow colored ruling class of CEOs does business round the world, at least 90.8 percent of the U.S.’s largest companies are still run by white men (Diversity Inc., 2014). The CEOs of the U.S. venture capital industry, for example, are predominantly male (89 percent) and white (76 percent) (Teten, 2014). And U.S. media conglomerates are mostly run by white men and staffed by white male cultural content producers (Pesta, 2012; Women’s Media Center, 2014).

Sexualized class inequality (the oppression of working women by corporations predominantly owned and run by men) continues to keep many women in subordinate positions. Women are over-represented in the ranks of the poor and under-represented among upper income earners; women working full time earn about 76 percent of what men do for similar jobs; and women spend over one and half times more hours than men doing unpaid domestic work (Bouw, 2013). Racialized class inequality (the oppression of people who are racialized by those who imagine themselves to be colour blind: “white people”) persists as well. Racialized workers are under-represented in managerial positions and over-represented in low-end service jobs. Also, racialized workers take home less in pay than non-racialized workers: racialized working men make 68 cents to 76 cents for every dollar earned by white workers and

racialized women earn even less than racialized and non-racialized men (Galabuzi, Caspiullai and Go, 2012).

Clearly, postmodern management's recognition of the millennial worker's "diversity" does not support the equitable redistribution of the surplus or challenge the power of a largely white and male ruling class. Instead, it transforms diversity into a resource to be exploited on behalf of it.

THE MILLENNIAL AS IMMISERATED VICTIM OF HARD TIMES

A fourth way the media represents the millennial is as an immiserated victim of hard times. Over the past few years, numerous news stories have framed the millennial as part of a completely impoverished cohort with slogans like "generation jobless" (The Economist, 2013), the "in-debt generation" (Parsons, 2014), "generation precarious" (Shupac, 2013) and "generational hopeless" (Richards, 2013).

There is truth in this media framing of the millennial. In the United States, 40 percent of unemployed workers are millennials, meaning there are about 4.6 million millennials who depend on extra-economic support systems to subsist (Fottrell, 2014). While the overall unemployment rate in Canada is about 6.9 percent, among millennials, it hovers between 13.5 percent and 14.5 percent (CBC, 2013). Debt has become a way of life and a way of work for millennials (Ellis, 2014; Ljunggren, 2013). Bonded to banks and struggling to keep up with debt payments, millennials work for meager wages, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, chipping away at mountainous totals on their credit card bills. Yet, the jobs they work to pay down debt are increasingly precarious (Cohen and dePeuter, 2013). Temp work is growing at a faster pace than full-time jobs and in 2012, two million temps competed for contractual gigs (Grant, 2013). Half of the workers who live in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) subsist in a precarious employment relation to numerous firms (Mcisaac and Yates, 2014). A recent Pew Research (2014) poll called "Millennials in Adulthood" explains that millennials "have higher levels of student loan debt, poverty and unemployment, and lower levels of wealth and personal income" than the Gen Xer and Boomer cohorts "had at the same stage of their life cycles." The millennial working class is under-employed, indebted and precarious. These circumstances foster intense psychological disturbances: stress, fits of anxiety, low self-esteem, muddled thoughts of depression and nihilism.

The media representation of the millennial as an immiserated victim of hard times sheds light on the real circumstances of the millennial working class but fails to explain them as an outcome of capitalist logics. Pew Research (2014), for example, frames the millennial's "difficult economic circumstances" with regard to the Great Recession (2007-2009) and the long-term effects of "globalization and rapid technological change." But the recession, globalization and rapid technological change are not in themselves responsible for the millennial working class's immiseration. They are effects of capitalist production for profit and the decisions made by corporate managers in pursuit of the goal of maximal profit on behalf of the shareholders they serve. As Marx (1990) might say, "[millennial] pauperism forms the condition of capitalist production and of the capitalist development of wealth...in proportion as capital accumulates, the situation of the [millennial] worker, be his [or her] payment high or low, must grow worse." In the capitalist system, the ultimate goal of all corporations is profit. Corporations try to maximize profit by keeping the cost of producing and circulating commodities as low as possible. To do so, they strategize to keep the amount of money they must pay workers for the jobs they do to as little as they can. At present, corporate profits are at an all-time high while wages are at an all-time low (Blodget, 2012; Brennan, 2012; Norris, 2014). Corporations are raking in super-profits because they are paying their millennial workers lower and lower sums for the work they do.

First, corporations reduce labour costs by demolishing standard employment relationships with workers. In response to a profit-squeeze stemming from worker mobilization, strikes and the autonomous impulse, corporations coordinated a shift from a Fordist to post-Fordist regime of accumulation and flexibilized employment relations (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Harvey, 1989). Corporations started replacing full-time and secure jobs with regular hours on a relatively fixed schedule with a non-standard employment regime that is part-time, insecure and temporary. By shirking a standard employment relation with workers, corporations flexibly hire and fire workers as they please, eliminate costs associated with benefits and maintain a precarious reserve army (Standing, 2011).

Second, corporations slash their labour costs by generalizing internment, or unpaid work programs (Perlin, 2009). These reinforce the class structure by privileging wealthy millennials and discriminating against the poor ones who cannot afford to work for free. Corporations use intern programs eliminate paid positions while millennials actively intern

themselves in hopes of acquiring the experience, skills and connections needed to land a waged job (de Peuter, Cohen, and Brophy, 2012).

Third, corporations drive down labour costs “here” by off-shoring tasks to low paid workers elsewhere. “Blue-collar” manufacturing jobs lost to offshoring were supposed to be replaced by higher-paying and less strenuous “service” collar jobs. But service corporations offshore tasks to workers in other countries as well and the primary reason they do so is to save on the cost of labour (Cheung and Rossiter, 2008). Also, corporations reduce labour costs by importing foreign workers – mechanics, builders, engineers, machinists and cooks – to do jobs here but for a wage that is less than what domestic workers are paid (Coles, 2013; Collacott, 2014; Goodman, 2014).

Fourth, corporations buy and implement automation systems to minimize or completely eliminate waged jobs. In almost every sector, corporations have developed and acquired information and communication technologies (ICTs) and algorithms to replace waged workers (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014). Boeing’s gigantic jets are automatically riveted by giant machines and Philips electronics are assembled by hundreds of robots. In transportation, firms are building driverless vehicles, conductor-less trains and pilotless drones. In music, algorithms write songs; in fashion, they design t-shirts; in publishing, they write books; in the news, they generate headline stories and daily information feeds. The more robots corporations employ, the fewer workers they must to pay.

Using some or all of the above strategies, corporations keep profits high by paying millennial workers as little wages as they can get away with. The profit-motive thus immiserates the millennial working class.

CONCLUSION: PEDAGOGY OF THE MILLENNIAL WORKING CLASS

As argued in this paper, four dominant media representations of the millennial distort and deflect attention away from the real capitalist determinations of twenty-first century millennial life and labour. The media representation of the millennial as a member of a youth cohort obscures the reality of class division within this cohort and all generational cohorts. The media representation of the millennial as a sovereign consumer gets millennials to see their freedom in the marketplace, not in the workplace. The media representation of the millennial as a worker to be managed obscures the capitalist power dynamics of modern management and the class, sexual and racial oppressions of the workplace. The

media representation of the millennial as a victim of hard times sheds light on the dire circumstances of the millennial working class but fails to explain millennial immiseration with regard to real capitalist determinations, the profit-motive in particular.

Together, the four media representations examined in this paper constitute a neoliberal capitalist pedagogy of the millennial. This media method of instruction teaches millennials to see themselves and their interests as identical with the capitalist system and the worldview of its owning strata. It obscures the real capitalist social relations that shape millennial life and labour and works to deter millennials from seeing themselves, their problems and their possibilities, as part of the concerns facing the working class. In a context in which pundits teach millennials to conform with the status quo, Left educators might try speaking *with* millennial workers about the essence of twenty-first century capitalism, learn from their experiences of it, and co-develop an understanding that aims to move beyond it.

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