Millennials: an urban legend?

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Millennials: the omnipresent term alternately arouses doubt, irony, and weariness. Who are these remarkable Millennials to whom the media attribute, on a nearly daily basis, a variety of characteristics distinguishing them from previous generations? At times the target of communications and marketing campaigns, at times an object of epistemology, Millennials are above all a mystery, a "*mix of contradictions*" (Jeremy Rifkin),[1] more an object of fantasy than scientific deduction.

Origins of the concept

To understand this evolution, let us go back to the archeology of the concept. The term "Millennial" first appeared in 1989 as the name given by American historians Neil Howe and William Strauss to a new generation whose oldest members were born in the early 1980s. Signaling a renewal in the sociology of generations, Howe and Strauss offered a theory of "*cycles of generations*" supposedly occurring in the same order since the 16th century.[2] According to this theory, generations of war heroes are systematically followed by generations of non-conformist, undecided youths. The work of Howe and Strauss was met with some skepticism: is the mere fact of being born during the same period sufficient for all members of a cohort to share the same specific traits? Do such specificities as the generation effect supplant other sociological determinants as powerful as social, family, or geographical belonging, or the age effect? Can it really be said that all individuals born between 1982 and 2003 are "*possessed of rational minds, a positive attitude, and selfless team virtue*"[3], as described by the two historians?

This tension between the general and the particular, between the age effect and the generational effect, is reflected in the vagueness that surrounds the notion of Millennials in the abundant literature devoted to the topic. For what is meant by Millennials? Even the terminology varies. Millennials, Generation Y, Generation Why, or digital natives: the profusion of labels only fuels the confusion, as does the imprecise definition of the term, which, from one study to the next, describes individuals "*born between 1980 and 1995*"[4] or "*between 1977 and 1995.*"[5] At most, this unclear delineation allows us to understand that "Millennials" is meant to designate not an age group, but a generation. Although it is difficult to place their exact number, this generation is thought to represent about 77 million individuals in the United States,[6] 89 million in the European Union,[7] and 14.2 million in France.[8] To crown the confusion, the Millennial label does not even garner the approval of those it is intended to describe: according to the Pew Research Center, only 40% of adults aged 18 to 34 define themselves as Millennials. Yet one of the underpinnings of a generation is precisely the feeling of belonging of its members.

A sociological concept turned marketing object

Despite the confusion, the concept of "Millennials" is a seductive one, perhaps because it seems effective in providing a key to reading new phenomena. While it was not commonly used in the 2000s, Google search statistics reveal a growing interest in the term "Millennial" starting in 2005, and a clear acceleration of its use starting in 2013, as the marketing world grabbed hold of it. What could be more convenient to define a new population that cannot be seduced by the same artifices as its parents? According to the Boston Consulting Group,[9] Millennials are "*changing the face of marketing forever*" and "*are distinguished from older generations by their spending habits, brand preferences, values, personalities and general outlook on life.*" At the same time, a prevailing view permeating North American and European media depicts Millennials as a selfish generation, and presumes to decode their relationship to the world of work and to dispense advice on how to work with them.

The word "Millennial" therefore has a double meaning: on the one hand, it is a marketing term referring to a segment of consumers and a segment of active young people (the two not necessarily overlapping) deemed sufficiently homogenous to constitute a distinct target for marketing and managerial actions; on the other, it refers to young people between the ages of about 18 and 35, whose potential distinctive characteristics scientific studies are just beginning to analyze, given the lack of perspective in time.

While the first designation—marketing and managerial— may seem easily questionable, its impact should not be underestimated: to what degree might the marketing and managerial view of these Millennials influence young people's perception of themselves through the power of suggestion, affecting their purchasing behaviors, and therefore their habits? The creation of the "Millennial" segment, aiming to sell specific products to young people, has the capacity to create distinct modes of consumption and thus to cause a generational effect, where behaviors and preferences might, initially, have only been the effect of age. Consequently, does it not contribute to turning the myth into reality—or at least, into a desirable ideal?

As part of its exploration of emerging urban trends, La Fabrique de la Cité proposes, in this first edition of its "Factcheck" series, to question certain representations associated with the Millennial figure, most typically depicted as follows: a young, ultra-connected college graduate who lives in the heart of a large city, once studied abroad, is resistant to the traditional hierarchized management of large companies, and has entrepreneurial aspirations. A vision perfectly summarized by the "4 i" formula (individualistic, interconnected, impatient, inventive) conveyed by French managerial literature.[10]

Yet are these traits, which we of course presume enlarged to create a peak effect, really specific to a generation? Are they not rather specific to a subgroup of a generation, or to the youth of the chosen cohort (who will lose these traits as they grow older)? Are they not even characteristics that describe a whole swath of the population which distinguishes itself, not by belonging to a generation or by age, but by its ability to reflect the deep and sometimes paradoxical transformations of our globalized and connected societies? Rather than a stereotype, should we not view the Millennial figure as an archetype?

Through an analysis of seven popular beliefs on the urban habits of Millennials, this study, in the form of a Factcheck, aims to deconstruct the (at times abusive) use of this term and to understand, based on a more objective foundation, what the "Millennial" concept can bring to the analysis of the societal evolutions that are transforming our cities, from housing to mobility, from ecology to political engagement.

Popular Belief #1: Millennials are an urban generation; those who do not already live in the city aspire to do so.[11]
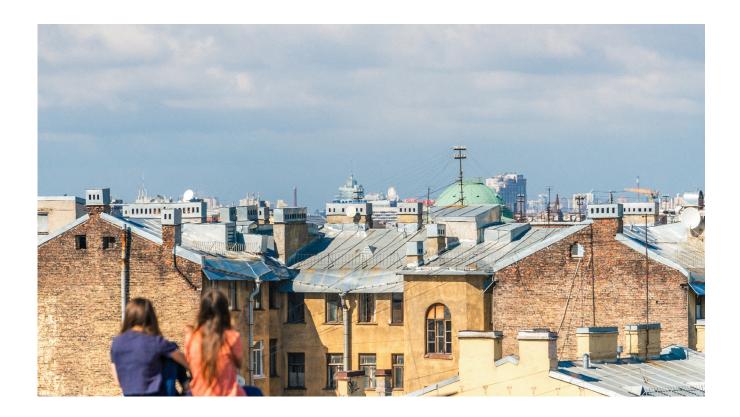

Defining the idea that Millennials are an urban generation as a popular misconception may seem surprising at first: all media combined continually remind us that we are now living in an era of cities, and that urbanization is only likely to become more pronounced. In the United States, urban areas of more than 50,000 inhabitants account for 71.2% of the population,[12] and in the European Union, 72.4% of citizens live in a city or city suburb.[13] Yet the "urban" qualifier is most readily ascribed to Millennials. And it's a fact: the cities of Europe are, on average, younger than E.U. member states,[14] while the portion of 22- to 34-year-olds in the inner cities of the 50 biggest U.S. metropolitan areas has been growing steadily since the 1990s, and decreases the further away one gets.[15] Several factors have been put forth to explain this "*youthification*" (Markus Moos)[16] of cities despite the ageing of the population as a whole: Millennials aged 25-34, pushed by shifts in labor markets and income levels, changing lifestyles (longer studies, later marriages, etc.) and an increased preference for a higher-density environment served by public transit, are choosing to live in cities, where previous generations were more readily opting for single-family homes in the suburbs. Thus, according to demographer Dowell Myers, American cities reached "*Peak Millennial*" in 2015.[17]

So why speak of popular belief? Because this notion linked to Millennials conjures up the image of a young person living in the high-density inner city of a large metropolis. What the above figures reveal, however, is that this increased concentration of young people happens within an urban space that is in fact much larger than the dense downtown core. This space includes near and far peripheries, recently agglomerated to the city through a process of periurbanization and which, in the past, would not necessarily have been considered urban. The image of the urban Millennial therefore applies only to a specific group of urban youth—the most privileged fringe. Above all, it corresponds to those who the media have dubbed the "*supermobile*,"[18] i.e., young college graduates with above-average earnings. Thus, 73% of Americans aged 25 to 34 holding a Bachelor's degree were living in large or medium-sized cities in 2011, compared to 67% in 1980.[19] This link between the level of education/income and the ability to settle in a city extends well beyond the Millennial generation: in North America, individuals working in the knowledge-based or service sector are more likely to live in higher density areas than those in manufacturing or trades occupations (Markus Moos). If not all young people are living in the central areas of cities, can we at least say the majority aspire to do so? Not

really, if we are to believe the statistics: in the United States, more young people (29%) wish to live in the suburbs than members of Generation X (25%). Accordingly, 529,000 Americans aged 25 to 29 moved from cities to suburbs in 2014, compared to just 426,000 the other way around,[20] not to mention the neo-rural movement taking place in developed countries, where more and more young people are choosing to leave the city to settle in the country. Finally, it is too easy to confuse the age effect with the generational effect: the current aspirations of Millennials are not set in stone, and while some currently dream of moving to the city, there is nothing to say they won't change their minds after they become parents or reach the age of 40.

Popular Belief #2: Detached from the idea of home ownership, and imbued with the idea of sharing, Millennials do not aspire to purchase their own home.[21]

In France, young people under 30 accounted for just 9.8% of new homeowners in 2013, compared to 12% in 2001.[22] In the United States, last year, the portion of first-time owners among home buyers reached its lowest (52%) since 1987.[23] What does this lower rate of home ownership mean? Are Millennials turning their backs on home ownership and opting for other living arrangements?

Rather than a lower aspiration, these numbers reveal the increasing difficulty for young people to access home ownership. In fact, these global figures hide a strong polarization along income level lines: first and foremost, the decline in home ownership levels affects those Millennials with the lowest incomes, who are less likely to purchase their home today than young people of the same age in the 1990s and 2000s.

This polarization, however, is not exclusive to those belonging to the 18 to 35 generation. In France, the *Direction de la recherche, des études, de l'évaluation et des statistiques* (DREES) estimates that "*access to home ownership by the least wealthy has declined since the end of the 1980s, while it has improved over the last forty years for the most affluent. Among the poorest 25- to 44-year-olds , the percentage of homeowners has halved from 1988 to 2013,* [but] *it has increased by half among the most wealthy of the same age since the 1970s.*"[24] In this day and age, the latter segment benefits more often from donations or inheritances—financial family assistance which, according to the DREES, increases the probability of purchasing a first primary residence by 15 points—while the first segment suffers directly from the rise in real estate costs, resulting from growing urbanization. The same phenomenon can be seen in the United States, where the difficulty for low-income individuals to access home ownership affects all generations: thus, the proportion of homeowners has been steadily dropping for eleven years (from 69% in 2004 to 63.7% in 2015).[25]

Consequently, the slowing of home ownership rates among young people may be interpreted more as the manifestation of a decline in income, savings, and purchasing power (the median income of young adults having gone, in the U.S., from $61,000 to $54,000 between 2000 and 2014),[26] combined with a pronounced widening in inequalities at the start of adult life, rather than a hypothetical detachment by Millennials from the notion of home ownership, motivated by noble ideals of sharing. Moreover, even disregarding income level, the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) of the Executive Office of the U.S. President notes that the lower likelihood of home ownership among young people is the expression not of an aversion to home ownership but rather of an evolution of lifestyles, which is delaying access but does not change the desire: "*The gradual shifts in labor force participation, increased college enrollment, and delayed marriage* (…) *suggest that Millennials are delaying homeownership until they grow older, rather than substituting away from homeownership altogether.*"[27] Millennials dream of owning their own homes as much as their elders: in the U.S., 90% of them expect to become homeowners some day,[28] and 93% of renters aged 25 to 34 believe it is likely they will one day purchase their own home, compared to 81% for all ages combined.[29]

To sum up, the effect of age and economic pressure explain the lower presence of young people among first-home buyers, much more than different aspirations specific to this particular generation.

Popular Belief #3: Millennials are overwhelmingly choosing public transit and giving up cars, a relic of the 20th century.[30]

Public transportation has the wind in its sails: in 2013, the United States recorded 10.7 billion trips on public transportation, the highest annual level in over 50 years. In France, public transit use in cities increased by 29% from 2002 to 2012, while 49.5 billion trips were made by public transit in the European Union during this period.[31]

Young people seem particularly fond of public transportation: in the major U.S. cities (San Francisco, Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Washington D.C., etc.), 43% of individuals under 30 use public transportation at least once a week, compared to only 12% of 30- to 60-year-olds.[32] Yet this generation was not predestined to adopt public transit use in such proportions. According to TransitCenter, American Millennials, born and raised in a car-centric environment, "*are defying their upbringing by choosing* [public] *transit.*"[33] Even today, Millennials seem not only to be using public transit more, but to be giving up driving, as shown by the decline in the percentage of young people with a driver's license, down from 76% in 1992 to 73% in 2012 among 18- to 29-year-olds in France.[34] In the U.S., this rate has dropped to 67% of 16- to 34-year-olds, a level not seen since 1963.[35] At the same time, the number of trips by bicycle among American 16- to 34-year-olds climbed 24% from 2001 to 2009, and the distance travelled by public transportation grew by 40%.

What is motivating this apparent desertion of cars by young people? Is it the consequence of a change in ideas about mobility, specific to this generation? Or is it the result of various constraints forcing them to rely on alternative modes of transport?

Let us put this desertion of the automobile into perspective. To begin, this phenomenon is not specific to one particular generation: in the U.S., between 2000 and 2010, the average distance travelled by car dropped by 25% among 16- to 30-year-olds, but also by 11% among 31- to 55-year-olds, denoting perhaps a change in habits for economic reasons.[36] Secondly, the craze for public transportation demonstrated by Millennials should not obscure the fact that in the U.S., this generation still travels mostly by car: 8 out of 10 young adults go to work by car, a proportion that has been stable since 1980.[37] Finally, cars are still objects of desire, even in the eyes of Millennials: this cohort is more likely to consider cars as an indicator of social success than their elders (32%, compared to 19% among individuals over 32)— a paradox for a generation considered detached

from cars. In fact, since owning a car soon after obtaining one's license has become increasingly rare and less necessary, cars have once again become items of social distinction.[38] The Urban Land Institute concludes that this generation "*is not destined for radical change*" and that "*their goals largely match those of their parents.*"[39]

Rather than the result of belonging to a generation, do changes in individual choices not depend more on factors such as balancing the cost of using public transit vs. a car, environmental consciousness, the desire to use travel time to surf the Internet, or the quality of local public transit service? Such is the diagnosis formulated by TransitCenter, which deems that it is not just personal values but, most importantly, the type of neighborhood people live in that informs their mobility choices.[40]

Thus, in urban areas, the choice of whether or not to use a car is directly linked to the characteristics of these cities, where parking spaces are rare, where traffic congestion is inevitable, and where the public transit network makes the purchase of a vehicle less relevant. In 2008, the *Commissariat général au développement durable* noted that car ownership in France "*is highly dependent on the type of territory of residence. The number of vehicles per adult varies from 0.8 in rural communes to 0.7 in rural centers and urban centers of less than 100,000; it is 0.6 in urban centers of more than 100,000 inhabitants and in the Paris suburbs, and falls to 0.3 within Paris.*"[41] The same year, the French *Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques* (INSEE) stated that just 22% of 18- to 20-year-olds in Île-de-France were able to drive, versus 67% in the country.[42] Urbanization might therefore partly explain the decline in the licensing rate and in car use, among young and older people alike.

But choices and habits are also a function of income level: in the United States, people with the highest incomes (annual household income above $150,000) and those who, conversely, have the lowest incomes, are more likely to travel by public transportation than individuals with average incomes.[43] In Europe, 56% of 18- to 31-year-olds do not have a car because they cannot afford one.[44]

We should therefore refrain from inferring, based on the statistics related to the decline in car sales among young people, a generational effect or a deliberate choice away from cars. Moreover, the rise of ridesharing suggests that the glory days of cars are not over, and that the economic situation and its effects on younger households are perhaps leading these young people to opt for occasional car use rather than the more costly option of car ownership.

Thus, some young people, as well as some older drivers subject to the same economic uncertainties, are choosing a new kind of compromise: to continue, through ridesharing, to use cars for certain types of trips too infrequent to justify buying and maintaining a vehicle, while using other forms of mobility (walking, biking, public transit) for shorter trips (e.g. daily commute to work).

This compromise seems motivated more by the economic constraints profoundly affecting some young people than by an aversion to cars. This explains why 85% of European Millennials expect to buy a vehicle within the next ten years,[45] perhaps believing they will eventually be in a financial situation that will be more conducive to the purchase of a vehicle.

Popular Belief #4: More conscious of ecological issues than previous generations, Millennials want to protect their environment—a concern that is reflected in their habits and behaviors.[46]

In 2015, Marshall Burke, Solomon M. Hsiang, and Edward Miguel (Stanford, U.C. Berkeley), demonstrated that *"the basic productive components of an economy (labor supply, labor productivity and crop yields) . . . all decline abruptly beyond temperature thresholds located between 20°C and 30°C."*[47] Not only does climate change pose a direct risk to life on this planet, but it has a number of equally disturbing indirect consequences. In the United States, the economic consequences of climate change are hitting the Millennial generation hardest: it is estimated that as a whole, Millennials will lose nearly $8.8 trillion in lifetime income because of climate change (NextGenClimate, August 2016). For example, a 21-year-old college graduate earning a median income would lose over $126,000 in lifetime income, and $187,000 in wealth.

In this context, Millennials, children of the living environment sacrificed by the excessive consumption habits of Baby Boomers, have developed a keen awareness of the importance of fighting climate change, a conviction that is reflected in more considerate consumption habits. In fact, 75% of Millennials say they are willing to pay more for a product that respects the environment (Nielsen, 2015),[48] compared to 51% of 50- to 64-year-olds.

And yet… young people today often appear to spend more, consume more energy, and be less aware of the environmental impact of their actions than one would expect from the "green generation" image with which they are so often crowned. They are at once both sensitive to the "sustainable" and "green" hot buttons and oblivious to the ecological cost of their habits, particularly their voracious use of new technologies. *"Surfing the web presupposes the existence of a very concrete infrastructure network: the immateriality of the web relies on very real equipment—a computer and box providing Internet access, transmission cables (copper, optical fibre), routers and, at the processing stage, servers, storage units, telecommunications equipment and air conditioners. Thus, one web query represents 10 grams of CO_2 equivalent, 5.5 grams of iron equivalent, and 2.7 grams of oil equivalent. For each Internet user in France carrying out an average of 949 searches per year, that corresponds to CO_2 emissions equivalent to driving 1.5 million kilometers by car. One statistic alone sums up the ICT paradox of materiality and virtuality: one avatar on the Second Life site consumed 1752 kWh per year—ten times the energy of a 'real' Cameroonian, twice the energy of a 'real' Algerian, or about as much as one flesh and blood Brazilian."*[49]

While the apparent ecological position of Millennials is therefore not entirely reflected in their actions, even their discourse is not as ecological as one might think. Jean Twenge, author of *Generation Me*,[50] found that Millennials were *"less likely* [than previous generations] *to say they did things in their daily lives to conserve energy and help the environment."*[51] Further, when Gen-Yers were asked to describe the type of commuter they identify with, the *"eco-friendly"* qualifier held the same rank as for other generations.[52]

Popular Belief #5: Millennials refuse to bow to the daily routine of commute-work-sleep. Thanks to new technologies, they are freed from physical constraints; any place can be a space for work or play.[53]

Young people aged 16 to 30 spend an average 3.2 hours per day on their smartphones, compared to 2.4 hours for people of Generation X (ages 31 to 45).[54] The first generation to grow up with the Web within arm's reach, Millennials cannot imagine their lives without the Internet or a smartphone. Is this generation, freshly arrived on the job market, responsible for the changes transforming work and living spaces, and the cities that contain them?

For several years, the media have been heralding the pending disappearance of the traditional office, destined to give way to co-working spaces where young entrepreneurs and salaried employees exchange ideas, liberated from the yoke of office wear, open space, or the eyes of their employer. Popular belief has Millennials unanimously adhering to this paradigm, preferring to work alone at home than in an office. However, a study conducted among young students of a large business school in France[55] qualifies this statement: while only 13% prefer the traditional office to more innovative options, these students show little enthusiasm for what the study calls third spaces—co-working spaces, coffee shops, even… train stations. While 70% of respondents expect to work in these spaces, 64% consider them to be "*less efficient than a classical office.*"

Beyond the question of the characteristics of the Millennial's ideal workspace is, of much greater importance to cities, the issue of the gradual disappearance of the spatial, tangible limits of the workplace. Increasingly, city dwellers are working in virtual spaces, writing on their computers, communicating by email and Skype, and storing their documents in the cloud. The workplace in its most reduced form is now the laptop computer, or even the smartphone. With the acceleration of innovative technologies and their democratization, the very idea of attributing the exclusive function of workplace to a space is called into question.

New habits, such as telecommuting, are taking shape thanks to the possibilities offered by new technologies. Often interpreted as a response to demands coming from employees, especially younger ones, this expansion is favorably received by the business world insofar as the tools it requires (Internet connection, computer, mobile phone) and the underlying principles—that a person can work, in theory, from anywhere—come to support a much more debatable idea: that a person can work, in theory, at any time.

The impact of technological developments on the world of work ultimately raises new problems: how to manage the boundaries between private life and professional life as well as the imperatives of being adaptable, having flexible work hours, yet maintaining a life balance? Such challenges are common to all those whose work lends itself to these new types of usages, but they are especially relevant for young people who have never known the business world before this evolution. It remains to be seen how the solutions found to these challenges will shape or reshape the cities of tomorrow.

Popular Belief #6: More idealistic and less individualistic than Generation X (ages 31-45), Millennials are reinventing civic engagement using information and communication technologies.[56]

In 2001, in their book *Millennials Rising: The Greatest Generation*, authors William Strauss and Neil Howe, fathers of the term "Millennials," painted the picture of a generation deeply involved in civic and political life. Given the decrease in criminal activity among young people and the upsurge in volunteering, the authors believed that in reaching adulthood, Millennials heralded an America "*on the brink of becoming someplace very new.*"[57] This book, which did not seek to compare these figures to the statistics available for previous generations, was to pave the way for dozens of articles lauding an altruistic generation determined to change the world. In 2008, Karl Weber and Eric Greenberg wrote, "*By comparison with past generations, Generation We is highly politically engaged.*"

Generation Me, published in 2006, counterbalances the "Generation We" idea, offering a different image of Millennials. Its author, Jean Twenge, later concluded from a study conducted among young students every year since the 1960s that "*all of the items measuring civic engagement and social capital were lower among Millennials than among Boomers at the same age.*"[58] For example, Millennials considered goals related to extrinsic values (money, image, fame) more important than those related to intrinsic values such as self-acceptance and affiliation with a community. This image is rather far from Howe and Strauss' prediction of Millennials as "*The Next Great Generation*" in civic involvement.[59]

In fact, for Hollie Russon Gilman (Harvard Kennedy School) and Elizabeth Stokes, Millennials "*do not pursue traditional forms of civic engagement, such as voting, and are more likely to eschew party identity.*"[60] This defection was cruelly felt when results of the British referendum on remaining within the European Union were announced: while 73% of citizens aged 18 to 24 claimed to be against "Brexit," only 36% of them voted, compared to 81% of those aged 55 to 64 and 83% of those aged 65 or over.[61]

Instead of voting, this generation prefers other types of involvement, such as volunteering, responsible consumption, or the use of social media as a means of political expression. In France, Anne Muxel notes that

"*voting is just one of a larger and more diverse pallet of tools. A growing proportion of youth prefers unconventional and more direct forms of action, often forms of protest, and gives legitimacy to participatory democracy.*"[62]
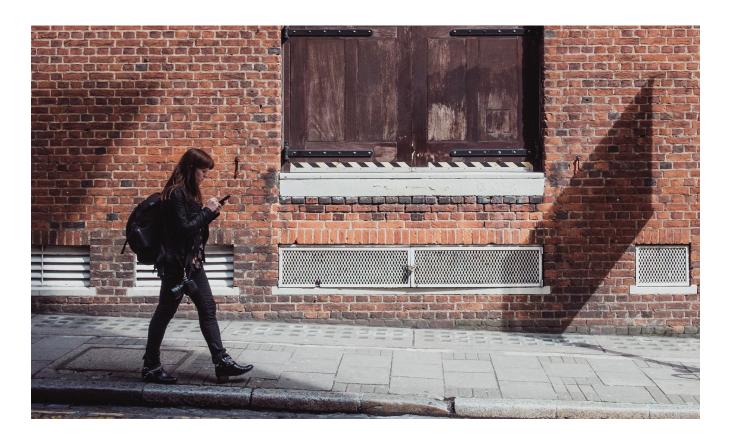
Among these unconventional means of action, the use of social media for political purposes is probably the one most often associated with young people of this generation. In the United Kingdom, 60% of young people consider that social media platforms bring political parties closer to voters, an opinion shared by only 39% of people over age 55.[63] As well, although 39% of American adults take part in political or civic activities on social networks, this proportion jumps to 67% among adults aged 18 to 24, according to a report published by the Pew Research Center in 2013. Is this really proof of political engagement by young people, or simply an effect tied to the scope of the Millennial presence on social networks? For example, only 13% of Americans over 65 use social networks for political purposes, but this rate climbs to 60% when put in relation to the proportion of social network users within this age group.[64]

At the end of the day, 18- to 35-year-olds are as interested in politics as their elders, and while they certainly use the channels created by the rapid development of information and communication technologies, this is equally the case with other generations, which simply makes Millennials the early adopters of this society-wide trend.

However, this diagnosis would not be complete without a comparison between the civic engagement of young college graduates and those of non-college graduates. Constance Flanagan, Peter Levine, and Richard Settersten (Tufts University)[65] pointed out that of the three million Americans under the age of 30 who voted in the Super Tuesday primaries of February 5, 2008, 79% had at least some college experience. Moreover, a student who had attended college was three to four times more likely to be contacted by a political party than a student who had not gone to college. In terms of political and civic engagement, it is therefore the passage through university, a doorway to civic engagement and a period when young people become aware of political issues, that conditions the desire and ability to participate in city life. In short, "*a social class divide in civic participation has existed for many generations*" (Flanagan, Levine, Settersten). Here too, the level of education, and not membership in the Millennial generation, proves to be the most pertinent analysis framework.

Popular Belief #7: Urban Millennials have entirely new expectations of their cities. They dream of a high-density city they can walk around in, smartphone in hand, surfing the web.[66]

This last popular belief sums up all the previous ones in the figure of the Millennial as a connected urban youth living in a "metropolitan village" that is dense, accessible, and has all the important services of a big city within walking distance. What the existence of this Millennial "myth" shows is not so much a biased or partial vision of youth than the effort made by various stakeholders (cities, marketing companies) to create a desirable figure (of an inhabitant, of a client), whose supposed expectations can serve as a guide to action, as even traditional points of reference are blurred. The Millennial thus becomes much more an archetype than a stereotype.

And in fact, it is difficult to distinguish expectations specific to Millennials with respect to their cities. For Julien Damon, "*the attitudes of urban youth toward their city are not radically or even very different from those of adults. Generally, both groups favor the same criteria for defining quality of life in the city.*"[67] Like previous generations, urban youth surveyed ranked cost of living, safety, and infrastructure quality at the top of their priorities. By the same token, the Urban Land Institute underlines the similarity of expectations of American Millennials for a neighborhood or community with those of other generations: quality of the environment (water and air) and access to healthy food come in first and second as criteria for what makes a neighborhood or community attractive,[68] both for Millennials and for their elders, and this, regardless of where they live (in the city or not, in a high- or low-density area).

Moreover, the preference of young people aged 18 to 35 for high-density, easily walkable cities is not as pronounced as popularly believed; in the United States, for example, it concerns only about half of them. Thus, just 51% of American Millennials prefer homes in more dense neighborhoods designed for travel on foot, as opposed to single-home neighborhoods requiring the use of a car,[69] although this proportion is higher than among Baby Boomers (43%). As well, while the growing craze for high-density mixed-use spaces is often primarily attributed to Millennials ("*Millennials represent a strong driver of demand for compact, mixed-use*

development formats, in suburban or other locations": Urban Land Institute[70]), it is not the prerogative of those aged 18 to 35. The Urban Land Institute also notes that "*just over half (52%) of all Americans and 63% of the millennial generation would like to live in a place where they do not need to use a car very often.*" For Markus Moos, this trend can be explained in part by the rapid expansion of the service economy within cities, which especially benefits from this type of high-density and easily accessible environment, and which has led to increasing emphasis on urban amenities (cultural and recreational facilities, beautified streetscapes, etc.).

However, Millennials do appear partial to high-density neighborhoods. According to demographer Dowell Myers, these Millennials will maintain an interest throughout their lives for walkable neighborhoods that offer access to retail as well as an efficient connection to public transit. While he believes Millennials will gradually move toward the suburbs as their households grow, particularly, like previous generations, as they become parents, the lifestyle that many will have experienced as young, single urbanites in higher density and accessible city centers will continue to influence their choices throughout their lives.[71] This expectation for higher-density spaces can also be seen in young people living in periphery or lower-density areas. We can see how focusing on expectations can easily lead from description to prescription: since a given (desirable) category of the population has expectations (description), an answer must be provided (prescription/action). The risk, naturally, is of transforming the expectations of a specific category (generation or even specific group within a generation) into standards (that must be valid and desirable for everyone).

To what degree has the figure of the young, connected urban Millennial, having grown up with Internet access as almost a right and a fact, and supposedly bearing a request for permanent and fluid connectivity, contributed to the growing deliberation on the development of connectivity in public spaces? In partnership with private stakeholders, cities are now reflecting on new solutions for providing connectivity in public spaces. This has already led to the appearance of LinkNYC WiFi terminals in New York City, developed by the company Intersection, and the launch of Veniam in Porto, which is transforming public buses and taxis into WiFi hotspots. The images conveyed definitely correspond to that of the urban and connected Millennial. This figure may have served as a trigger for deliberation, if not action, by acting as a magnifying mirror for societal mutations taking place as a result of the advent of new technologies. And it can serve just as well today to market this policy effectively by associating it with the seductive figure of the active youth. But the interest in a policy for developing connectivity in public spaces lies in its ability to reflect usages beyond those of the sole figure of the young connected urbanite (who already has efficient connection tools) by addressing and adapting to, perhaps as a priority, those forgotten by the digital era, including isolated populations (elderly, jobless or living in poverty) who may not have a home Internet connection, mobile data plan or smartphone, or perhaps foreign tourists who lack a mobile phone connection.

Getting to the bottom of the Millennial issue...

The solution to the Millennial enigma may well lie in work published several decades before they were born. In 1928, in his book *The Problem of Generations*,[72] Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim reviewed a number of existing and contradictory theories on generations, and put forth a new theory, which may help in understanding the apparent gap between the Millennial stereotype and the millions of individuals to whom it is meant to refer. According to Mannheim, there is first a "*generation location*" that groups together individuals by "*similarity of location*," belonging to a same age group and having experienced the same historical events, without necessarily having perceived or experienced them in the same way. For Mannheim, however, "*a generation in the sense of a location phenomenon falls short of encompassing the generation phenomenon in its full actuality*" and is made up of actual generations marked by "*participation in the common destiny of this historical and social unit.*" These actual generations involve the creation of ties between their members though "*experiential, intellectual, and emotional data.*" More specifically, the generation as an actuality is made up of generation units whose members understand and react to experiences in the same way. "*Youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation; while those groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways, constitute separate generation units,*" Mannheim explains.

Coming back to this frame of reference sheds new light on the issue of defining the concept of Millennials. Does the way that Millennials are described—urban, connected, mobile—not make them a "*generation as an actuality*"? If youth "*is just a word,*" then the Millennial offered as a representation of all 18- to 35-year-olds in the world is hardly more than an urban legend. The characteristics readily associated with Millennials could, in truth, be those of a highly educated "*generation in actuality,*" with a high standard of living, on which

media attention is focused to the detriment of a silent majority whose living conditions and lifestyles strongly resemble those of their elders.

What better way to rid oneself of the image of the spoiled, ultra-connected Millennial than to remember the following statistics: 13.5 million young Americans currently live in poverty (compared to 8.4 million in 1980), under the yoke of student debt now totaling $1.3 trillion,[73] while the European Union estimates that 29% of its citizens aged 15 to 29 face the risk of sinking into poverty or exclusion.[74]

How was the Millennial stereotype able to flourish? Without getting into the massive economic stakes tied to the creation of this concept, an urban legend is a metaphor for society's hopes and fears at a given time. The study of Millennials and their supposed habits therefore reveals more about our societies as a whole and our reactions to the transformations they are undergoing, than about our young people themselves.

In fact, regardless of the urban habit or evolution at hand, the generational framework systematically proves less pertinent than other prisms, such as income level or education. Not to mention one major oversight: affiliation to a generation denotes above all belonging to a certain age group. Are the character traits attributed to Millennials not, above all, those of youth? Is it possible that the age effect is being incorrectly interpreted as a generation effect? It is this confusion that Dowell Myers is pointing to when he states: "*It may be that planners and policymakers are not interested in Millennials, per se, but rather are really just interested in young adults ages 25–34.*"[75]

An attraction to city life, a dependence on new technologies requiring connectivity, an interest in less car-centric mobility, difficulty accessing housing… all these phenomena are closely related to the economic circumstances and technological and societal changes of our era; they represent aspirations held and obstacles encountered by the young and not-so-young alike. It is therefore up to us to relegate the term "Millennial" to the marketing lexicon, where it has been so brilliantly used, and to permanently distance it from all attempts to analyze urban habits. It is time to rebuild the conditions for rigorous analysis of the relationship between young people and the city, an essential step if we really are to foster the emergence of inclusive and sustainable metropolises.

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