

Responding to the needs of Millennials: framing intergenerational fairness within an intersectional understanding of solidarity

This article is a comment about FEPS SPERI Paper: [Baby Boomers vs Millennials and the new politics of intergenerational fairness](#)

In a time in which the vote of the social groups on whom Progressives have traditionally relied for support (such as unions and working-class voters) is increasingly fragmented, it is understandable why debates around intergenerational fairness are seen by some in the centre-left as providing a solution to this challenge. But is that the case? Kate Alexander Shaw's report for SPERI and FEPS (2018) makes a crucial contribution to this overdue debate. However, it also demonstrates that the answer to that question is not a simple one.

Indeed, as the report pointedly argues, the political language around intergenerational fairness has begun to crystallise without facing a critical analysis of its assumptions. For example, following the Brexit referendum, narratives that place the interests of Millennials and Baby Boomers in opposition to each other are now virtually omnipresent in the political debate in the United Kingdom. Indeed, some portray Millennials as currently paying the price of the easier access to housing and education that was faced by Baby Boomers, while others depict the former generation as inactive and passive, which – they say – explains its inability to become prosperous. This sense of intergenerational conflict has been reinforced in political analyses of the results of the 2017 snap election, in which Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party – despite losing – received an unexpected level of popular support, namely from Millennial voters.

By stressing the empirical basis of the argument in favour of intergenerational forms of redistribution (or, to be precise, its lack thereof), the report demonstrates the limits of this discourse. Indeed, focusing exclusively on age inequality may unwittingly neglect other lines that structure the distribution of wealth, opportunity and access to a good life. Rather, as Shaw writes, 'the challenges facing young people, such as job insecurity in liberalised labour markets, increased personal debt and low savings rates [...] are in fact symptoms of an increasingly skewed political economy in which young people simply have the misfortune to be new entrants' (2018, p. 7). For example, as the report states, it is clear that access to housing is increasingly difficult for Millennials (who are also highly represented among the newly emerged precariat). However, as Shaw implies, there are also many Baby Boomers who face destitution. That is, the existence of some forms of intergenerational inequality does not deny the continued relevance of others that are intra-generational.

Nonetheless, I believe that the author is correct in stressing that the increasing success of this narrative, reflecting the emergence of new political lines, indicates an opportunity for Progressives to engage in conversations about wealth redistribution which have been overdue – particularly

since the 2007–2008 financial crisis. Indeed, FEPS' examination of the results of the Millennial Dialogue survey (2016) suggests that Progressives can harness this transformative time to overcome political divisiveness. That is, Progressives can – and should – redefine age (and hence intergenerational inequality) as one among other dimensions (class, gender, ethnicity...) around which a new understanding of solidarity may be imagined and built.

Indeed, as the Millennial Dialogue report also made clear, not only do Millennials back policies that assist the elderly, but they also hold several priorities that could support the construction of a new 'social compact between generations' (Shaw, 2008, p. 7). These include two topics repeatedly mentioned by Millennials as being of their concern, such as sustainability and access to health. Yet there are also other issues, such as access to care and fair taxation that could potentially unite the concerns of Millennials and Baby Boomers.

Intergenerational fairness is an important component of a progressive social compact for the 21st century, and it can inspire conversations around economic and social questions that have hitherto been perceived as separated – e.g. unregulated capitalism and non-inclusive growth. However, such fairness can only be achieved if dualistic, zero-sum views of distribution are overcome by a multidimensional understanding of inequality. Intergenerational debates must hence be framed within, if not replaced by, an intersectional framework.

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