



CAN'T EVEN: HOW MILLENNIALS BECAME THE BURNOUT GENERATION

Bile Bile Yapamıyorum: Y Kuşağı Nasıl Tükenmiş Kuşak Oldu?

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ABSTRACT

It is surprising how one generation can be unmindful of another generation's lived reality and challenges. How well do the Baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and Generation X (or Gen X, born between 1965 and 1980) understand the lived reality of the millennials (Generation Y or Gen Y, born between 1981 and 1996)? Surely, boomers and Gen X's would benefit from understanding millennials and their upbringing, cultural conditioning, and expectations. Anne Helen Petersen's *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* is a good starting point in this understanding. The book's central theme is the feeling of millennials' "burn-out" in the face of growing up, securing a career, and raising children. "Can't even" means one is emotionally overwhelmed. Petersen explores five topics: (i) the conditioning of the millennials by their boomer parents, (ii) millennials' expectations of college and university, (iii) internships and graduate employment and careers, (iv) leisure and free time, and (v) parenthood. Petersen investigates the millennials' "burnout" and opportunities and challenges in the broader context of late capitalism (neoliberal ideology) and global events (the 2003 Iraq War, the 2008 recession, and the COVID-19 pandemic). Overall, the book highlights that a balanced and quality life for millennials requires intergenerational understanding and government policies to enable them to experience the "good life".

Keywords: boomer, burnout, generation y, generation x, millennials.

Öz

Bir neslin başka bir neslin yaşamış gerçekliğini ve zorluklarını nasıl görmezden gelebileceği şaşırtıcıdır. Baby Boomers (1946 ile 1964 arasında doğanlar) ve X Kuşağı (1965 ile 1980 arasında doğanlar), Y kuşağının (1981 ile 1996 arasında doğanlar) yaşanan gerçekliğini ne kadar iyi anlıyor? Kuşkusuz, Boomers ve X kuşağı, Y kuşağını ve onların yetiştirilme tarzını, kültürel koşullarını ve beklentilerini anlamaktan faydalanacaktır. Anne Helen Petersen'in *Bile Bile: Y Kuşağı Nasıl Tükenmiş Kuşak Haline Geldi* kitabı bu anlayışta iyi bir başlangıç noktasıdır. Kitabın ana teması Y kuşağının büyüme, kariyer yapma ve çocuk yetiştirme karşısında hissettikleri "tükenmişlik"

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duygusudur. “Yapamam” fikri kişinin duygusal olarak bunalmış olduğu anlamına gelir. Petersen beş konuyu araştırıyor: (i) Y kuşağının hızlı ebeveynleri tarafından koşullandırılması, (ii) Y kuşağının kolej ve üniversiteden beklentileri, (iii) stajlar ve mezun istihdamı ve kariyerleri, (iv) eğlence ve boş zamanlar ve (v)) ebeveynlik. Petersen, Y kuşağının “tükenmişliği”, fırsatlarını ve zorluklarını geç kapitalizmin (neoliberal ideoloji) ve küresel olayların (2003 Irak Savaşı, 2008 ekonomik durgunluđu ve COVID-19 salgını) daha geniş bağlamında araştırıyor. Genel olarak kitap, Y kuşağı için dengeli ve kaliteli bir yaşamın nesiller arası anlayış ve onların “iyi yaşamı” deneyimlemelerini sağlayacak hükümet politikaları gerektirdiğini vurguluyor.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Boomer, tükenmişlik, y kuşağı, x kuşağı, milenyum kuşağı.

Petersen, Anne Helen (2020). *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation*. London: Chatto & Windus.

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Petersen is a millennial and has experienced her generation’s struggle. The book reflects her thoughts –she is a participant observer– and uses interviews, personal memories and observations, and academic journals and studies. Though the analysis and case studies refer to the United States, many content elements relate to the United Kingdom. Petersen

highlights that the millennials are not one block of uniform young adults but reflect the diversity of Western multicultural societies. Indeed, millennial upbringing and self-identity are influenced by gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and health conditions and impairments. Also, city or small town location, parental upbringing and values, married or unmarried parents, and historical conjuncture impact a millennial's opportunities and aspirations.

Key to the book is understanding the demands millennials face. For millennials, entering adulthood (adulthood) is "hard", "because living in a modern world is somehow both easier than it's ever been and yet unfathomably complicated" (p. xiv). The millennial's burnout and precarity are not necessarily the future picture. Things can change for the better. Petersen remarks, "... it doesn't have to be this way. That's the refrain of this book, and that, too, remains true" (p. x). It is not the boomers, Gen X's, millennials, and Gen Z's to blame for the burnout but the socio-economic system they live in and its failure to cater to citizens' basic needs: affordable homes, education, medical care, and jobs. Petersen comments, "millennials don't stand a chance. At least in the current system." Equally, nor do significant numbers from other generations, "... it's not any single generation that's broken... or failed. It's the system itself" (p. x).

Chapter one (Our Burnt-Out Parents) is important because it explains parental motivations. It argues that boomer parents, teachers and coaches create a dilemma for their children. They persuade them to replicate their parents' social and class status through regularly planned leisure pursuits, high school and college grades, and professional employment. This is supposed to result in wealth and happiness. Why did boomer parents become so pushy? Primarily a fear of downward mobility. After the economic growth and materialism of the 1950s and 1960s, panic set in during the 1970s and 1980s. Industries stagnated, neoliberal policies (replacing the long-standing welfare capitalism), automation and outsourcing (to developing countries) created anxiety. Additionally, a greater individualistic-materialistic emerged that reconfigured lives and mentalities. Believing they were good parents, the middle-class boomers steered their offspring from a carefree childhood towards a more organised and planned existence. Children became "mini-adults" before their time.

Chapter two (Growing Mini-Adults) explains that the preparation for adulthood influences the child's upbringing (concerted cultivation), along with overprotective nurturing. Conversely, working-class children are less

organised by parents and more independent and imaginative. Their class values do not suit the bourgeois workplace of planning, networking, lengthy resumes, and confidence when speaking with authority. Also, their freer, less structured upbringing might result in a less aspirational young adult. If parents cannot guide their self-aware child, they spend years trying to navigate an educational system and beyond through trial and error. Chapter three (College at Any Cost) explores whether hard work and a demanding study regime produce a rounded graduate or burnout. Unlike Gen X's, whose conditioning means they express their emotions less frequently, the millennials report feeling unhappy, stressed, sleep-deprived and anxious. Unemployment, underemployment, and student debt create further dissatisfaction.

Chapter four contrasts the once utilitarian attitude towards work as something to pay the bills and give security with that of the millennials' indoctrination into believing in status, pay, and "cool" work and "passion" for work. Petersen says this is a "modern bourgeois phenomenon" and a "burn-out trap" (p. 68). In this reasoning, the work-life balance is missing. In response, during the 2010s, some millennials found contentment in non-professional minimum-wage service sector jobs that allowed them free time to discover themselves and enjoy life. Chapters five and six discuss employment and millennials' unique problems and concerns, like the diminishing working conditions compared to boomers. Debated are the pitfalls of the gig economy and freelance work. Issues like overworking (having two jobs) to meet the cost of living and the employer's surveillance of work output leave workers dissatisfied.

Chapter seven explores how the continuous use of computers and mobile phones leads to "digital exhaustion". Chapter eight (What is a Weekend?) discusses reduced leisure time and longer work hours. The outcome for millennials is stress, alcohol consumption, and poor sleep. Chapter nine (The Exhausted Millennial Parent) analyses how raising young children is problematic for some millennial parents. The double burden of employment outside the home and child-rearing disproportionately falls on the shoulders of the mother. As a result, some millennial women choose not to marry or have babies. Petersen's conclusion argues that things do not have to be this way. To change the status quo, Petersen states that millennials and their allies must "act, vote, and advocate for solutions" to benefit "everyone" (p. 242). Moreover, all generations need to come together and build a fairer society.

Though the book is well-written, Chapters five to nine contain somewhat familiar knowledge; other criticisms are that it does not account for the millennial working class or underclass children or those living in less developed countries. Likewise, the boomers' glory days were short-lived, covering the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Before then was the urban poverty of the 1920s and 1930s and World War Two during the 1940s. Petersen might have begun her book more critical of neoliberalism, which emerged in the 1980s as the dominant Western ideology, as neoliberal policies helped create a society that the boomers benefitted from but caused them anxiety, too.

The book's significance for family sociology is that it makes us better understand the boomer parents' motivations to direct their millennial children's socialisation at home and in the educational system. Petersen highlights young adults' challenges and the need for a new upbringing model incorporating intergenerational cooperation and young people's well-being. *Can't Even* suits students of culture and politics and general readers.

Reference

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