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# LEFT TURN AHEAD?

Surveying attitudes of young people  
towards capitalism and socialism

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## Summary

- Millennials have long been portrayed as a politically disengaged and apathetic generation. In recent years, however, that portrayal has changed drastically. The rise of mass movements such as Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, the 'Greta Thunberg movement' and Momentum, together with the 'campus culture wars', have turned perceptions upside down. Today, Millennials are much more commonly described as a hyper-politicised generation, which embraces 'woke', progressive and anti-capitalist ideas. This is increasingly extended to the first cohorts of the subsequent generation, 'Generation Z'.
- Surveys show that there is a lot of truth in the cliché of the 'woke socialist Millennial'. Younger people really do quite consistently express hostility to capitalism, and positive views of socialist alternatives of some sort. For example, around 40 per cent of Millennials claim to have a favourable opinion of socialism and a similar proportion agree with the statement that 'communism could have worked if it had been better executed'.
- For supporters of the market economy, this should be a cause for concern, but so far they have mostly chosen to ignore this phenomenon, or dismiss it with phrases such as 'Young people have always gone through a juvenile socialist phase' or 'They will grow out of it'. But this is simply not borne out by the data. There are no detectable differences between the economic attitudes of people in their late teens and people in their early 40s. It is no longer true that people 'grow out' of socialist ideas as they get older.
- To fill in some of the remaining gaps in the literature, the IEA has commissioned an extensive survey into the economic attitudes of Millennials and 'Zoomers' (i.e. Generation Z), which broadly confirms and deepens the impression we get from previous surveys. For

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example, 67 per cent of younger people say they would like to live in a socialist economic system.

- Young people associate 'socialism' predominantly with positive terms, such as 'workers', 'public', 'equal' and 'fair'. Very few associate it with 'failure' and virtually nobody associates it with Venezuela, the erstwhile showcase of '21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism'. Capitalism, meanwhile, is predominantly associated with terms such as 'exploitative', 'unfair', 'the rich' and 'corporations'.
- 75 per cent of young people agree with the assertion that climate change is a specifically capitalist problem (as opposed to a side-effect of industrial production that would occur in *any* economic system). 71 per cent agree with the assertion that capitalism fuels racism. 73 per cent agree that it fuels selfishness, greed, and materialism, while a socialist system would promote solidarity, compassion and cooperation.
- 78 per cent of young people blame capitalism (not NIMBYism and supply-side restrictions) for Britain's housing crisis. Consequently, 78 per cent also believe that solving it requires large-scale government intervention, through measures such as rent controls and public housing.
- 72 per cent of young people support the (re-)nationalisation of various industries such as energy, water and the railways. 72 per cent also believe that private sector involvement would put the NHS at risk.
- 75 per cent of young people agree with the statement that 'socialism is a good idea, but it has failed in the past because it has been badly done (for example in Venezuela)'. The cliché that '*real* socialism has never been tried' is not just a cliché: it is also the mainstream opinion among Millennials and Zoomers.
- None of this means that Britain is full of young Marxist-Leninists. Socialist ideas are widespread, but they are also thinly spread. When presented with an anti-capitalist statement, the vast majority of young people agree with it (in our survey, this was true of every single anti-capitalist statement, without exception). However, when presented with a diametrically opposed pro-capitalist statement, we often find net approval for that statement too. This suggests that when young people embrace a socialist argument, this is often not a deeply-held conviction. It may simply be the argument they are most familiar with.
- None of our results mean that supporters of capitalism should throw in the towel, concede defeat in the battle of ideas and just accept that the future belongs to socialism. But it does suggest that they should take

'Millennial Socialism' far more seriously than they currently do. They should treat it as a challenge and engage with it, rather than dismiss it or deny it exists.

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# Introduction: from 'Generation Apathy' to 'Generation Left'

The Millennial generation has long been portrayed as politically disengaged and inactive to the point of apathy. Already in 1997, when the last cohorts of 'Generation X' and the first cohorts of the Millennial generation were coming of age, the *Independent* despaired over their low levels of electoral turnout, describing them as 'airheads and know-nothings':

[T]he group who have been the most consistently maddening have been the young – Thatcher's children – first-time voters. [...] Not voting is a fashion statement. Not voting is cool. [...]

Charles Stewart-Smith [...] tries to put a positive spin on it: 'People often call the young apathetic, but I don't think they are.' The evidence? 'Well, two-thirds of them have been on some kind of animal rights demonstration.' Oh. Wonderful. That's really good to know. We both laugh, otherwise you'd cry.

Who do you blame? Possible culprits include: Thatcher and all her works, a dud education system, dumbed-down yooof culture.<sup>1</sup>

In 2001, the *Guardian* described them as 'the apathy generation':

[N]ot bothering is fast becoming the popular choice as far as Britain's young voters are concerned. [...]

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<sup>1</sup> 'Mrs Thatcher's airhead revenge', *Independent*, 27 April 1997 (<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/mrs-thatcher-s-airhead-revenge-1269854.html>).

[N]ot only are the new generation of first-time voters less than lukewarm about politics per se, but they are not even likely to use their vote to make a rebellious gesture. [...]

'There is a culture of hedonism among young people. Life is for having a good time, not for getting involved in issues that concern society. There are no demonstrations and protests that pull young people together,' says [head teacher Mike Dukes]. 'Not like in my day.'<sup>2</sup>

In 2004, a study on the subject reported (O'Toole 2004):

There has been widespread concern about young people's political participation in the United Kingdom. [...] [T]he turn-out rate among 18-24 year-olds in the 2001 General Election, which was estimated at only 39%, [...] reflects a continuing downward trend in electoral participation among British youth. The UK Government has been so concerned about declining political and civic engagement among young people that in 1997 it commissioned the Crick Report [...]

There is furthermore a dominant media narrative that portrays young people in Britain as politically inactive, with commentators talking of the growth of an 'apathy generation' [...] It is routinely observed in Britain that more young people voted in the reality TV show *Big Brother* than in they did in the last General Election.

As recently as in 2015, an article published by Georgetown University's Berkley Center still stated:

Political apathy—whether it translates into low voter turnout [or] disengagement from civic activities [...] is closely linked to the youth in Britain. Young Britons seem to be disconnected from the political system, processes, and parties in the United Kingdom, an element that causes great concern to officials.<sup>3</sup>

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2 'The apathy generation', *Guardian*, 9 May 2001 (<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2001/may/09/familyandrelationships.election2001>).

3 'Political apathy among youth in the United Kingdom', Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, Georgetown University (<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/political-apathy-among-youth-in-the-united-kingdom>).

Since then, however, the media portrayal of the Millennial generation – which, increasingly, now also included the first cohorts of the subsequent ‘Generation Z’ – has changed drastically, to the point of an almost complete reversal. ‘Corbynmania’, the ‘Youthquake’ of 2017,<sup>4</sup> the campus culture wars, the rise of ‘Cancel Culture’ and ‘the Great Awokening’, the ‘Greta Effect’, the rise of mass movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter (which are, in the main, youth movements), and social media activism, have turned perceptions upside down. Younger people are now commonly portrayed as an intensely politicised generation – and not just politicised in general, but specifically, as a generation which embraces radical left-wing ideas. This is true regardless of whether the phenomenon is described in an approving or in a critical manner. For example, the term ‘Millennial Socialism’, which describes the rebirth of socialism as a popular youth movement, has been used by publications as varied as the *Economist*,<sup>5</sup> the *New Statesman*,<sup>6</sup> the *Financial Times*,<sup>7</sup> *Fox News*,<sup>8</sup> the *New York Times*,<sup>9</sup> the *Sydney Morning Herald*,<sup>10</sup> the *Evening Standard*<sup>11</sup> and the *Guardian*.<sup>12</sup> They obviously disagreed in their

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- 4 Some have disputed that there really was a ‘Youthquake’ in 2017, arguing that electoral turnout among young voters has been no higher in 2017 than it was in 2015. (See ‘The myth of the 2017 “youthquake” election’, BBC News, 29 January 2018 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-42747342>)). But this relies on an excessively narrow definition of who qualifies as a ‘young voter’. It is true that turnout among people in their late teens and early 20s was no higher in 2017 than in 2015. Turnout was, however, substantially higher among people in their mid-to-late 20s, people in their 30s, and people in their early 40s, or in other words, among Millennials, and the youngest cohorts of Generation X. So, there was a Youthquake in 2017 – it was just more of a ‘Millennialquake’ than a ‘Zoomerquake’.
  - 5 ‘Millennial socialism: A new kind of left-wing doctrine is emerging. It is not the answer to capitalism’s problems’, *Economist*, 16 February 2019 (<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/02/14/millennial-socialism>).
  - 6 ‘The rise of millennial socialism. Across the world, young activists are turning to old ideas. Why?’, *New Statesman*, 5 June 2019.
  - 7 ‘Quantitative easing was the father of millennial socialism’, *Financial Times*, 1 March 2019 (<https://www.ft.com/content/cbed81fc-3b56-11e9-9988-28303f70cfcf>).
  - 8 ‘What is Millennial socialism?’, *Fox News*, 5 February 2020 (<https://www.foxnews.com/us/millennial-socialism-bernie-sanders-ocasio-cortez-aoc>).
  - 9 ‘The Millennial socialists are coming’, *New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/30/opinion/democratic-socialists-progressive-democratic-party-trump.html>).
  - 10 ‘Anxiety plus ignorance: Why Millennials are embracing socialism’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 February 2019 (<https://www.smh.com.au/national/anxiety-plus-ignorance-why-millennials-are-embracing-socialism-20190222-p50zj5.html>).
  - 11 ‘Why young people are abandoning Jeremy Corbyn’, *Evening Standard*, 27 March 2019 (<https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/esmagazine/jeremy-corbyn-young-voters-a4100906.html>).
  - 12 ‘We were told capitalism had won. But now workers can take back control’, *Guardian*, 29 September 2019 (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/29/alternative-capitalism-workers-take-back-control-class-politics>).

assessment of whether ‘Millennial Socialism’ was a good thing, a bad thing, or somewhere in between. But they fully agreed that the revival of socialism as a mainstream ideology was indeed a real phenomenon, and that it was primarily driven by the younger generations.

Today, an article about Millennials and/or Millennial-adjacent cohorts is highly unlikely to complain about apathy. If it is a critical article, it is far more likely to complain about political zealotry and intolerance. It may portray the younger generations as oversensitive ‘snowflakes’ who find everything offensive, as puritanical woke killjoys, as sanctimonious virtue-signallers, or as naïve magic-money-tree socialists – but certainly not as passive and disengaged.

In 2019, the *Telegraph* published an interview with a number of young conservative activists, who talked about their experience of being demonised and ostracised by their agemates for their political views.<sup>13</sup> If a similar mini-documentary had been made a decade earlier, the emphasis would probably have been on how politically active young people are considered nerds and weirdos by their agemates for being politically active at all. In 2019, what made those young people stand out was not their political activism as such (which was presented as completely unexceptional), but the fact that they were not left-wing activists, like ‘normal’ young people.

Talk about ‘Generation Apathy’ has disappeared without a trace. It has given way to an entirely different narrative about ‘Generation Left’, the title of a more recent book on the issue of younger people’s political engagement. The author, Keir Milburn (2019), explains:

Something remarkable has happened over the last few years. Age has emerged as the key dividing line in politics. Young people are much more likely to vote Left and hold left-wing views, while older generations are more likely to vote Right and hold conservative [...] views. [...] The scale of the divide is unprecedented [...] [but] its political significance has been overlooked. [...] A generation moving left is producing a new generation of Left ideas and practices. It’s a phenomenon that’s currently among the most important in the world to grasp.

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13 “‘I was told to kill myself for being Tory’: Young Conservatives share the abuse they’ve suffered for their politics’, *The Telegraph* (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/10/01/told-kill-tory-young-conservatives-share-abuse-suffered-politics/>).

*Tribune* magazine agrees:

The emerging generation is the most left-wing in decades, driven by a desire for fundamental social change [...] ‘Generation Left’ [...] has largely looked to the left for solutions to the problems with which it is faced [...] [I]t favours the kind of radical action on climate change, and against embedded structural racism, which only the socialist left appears to be offering.<sup>14</sup>

One particularly illustrative manifestation of this change from ‘Generation Apathy’ to ‘Generation Left’ is the repositioning of *Teen Vogue*, an online magazine with millions of readers. *Teen Vogue* is the youth edition of the fashion magazine *Vogue*, which was originally solely concerned with fashion and celebrity gossip. About five years ago, though, the editors saw the sign of the times, and gave the magazine a complete makeover.<sup>15</sup> It now frequently runs stories which, with some differences in style and emphasis, could just as easily appear in the *Socialist Worker*.

Here is a selection of recent titles from *Teen Vogue*:

- ‘Who is Karl Marx: Meet the anti-capitalist scholar’, 10 May 2018
- ‘Meet Ash Sarkar, the communist who called Piers Morgan an “idiot”’, 15 July 2018
- ‘Bernie Sanders explained what Democratic Socialism means to him’, 26 February 2019
- ‘How I can critique capitalism — even on an iPhone’, 1 May 2019
- ‘4 big takeaways from Bernie Sanders’s speech on Democratic Socialism’, 13 June 2019
- ‘Kshama Sawant: I’m a socialist taking on Amazon and a corporate onslaught in Seattle’, 23 October 2019
- ‘Bernie Sanders shares his plan for a working-class revolution’, 20 November 2019

14 ‘Tom Blackburn: How Keir Starmer Alienated “Generation Left”’, *Tribune*, 13 March 2021 (<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2021/03/how-keir-starmer-alienated-generation-left>).

15 ‘Inside Teen Vogue: “Our readers consider themselves activists”’, *Guardian*, 25 February 2017 (<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/feb/25/teen-vogue-readers-consider-themselves-activists>).

- 'Pete Buttigieg is worried about the "revolutionary politics of the 1960s," but we need them now more than ever', 26 February 2020
- 'Rosa Luxemburg: Who was the revolutionary socialist and author?', 5 March 2020
- 'What youth activists can do to keep fighting for a progressive future', 13 March 2020
- 'The Coronavirus pandemic demonstrates the failures of capitalism', 24 March 2020
- 'What is Democratic Socialism and why is it growing more popular in the U.S.?', 1 May 2020
- 'Young Democratic Socialists of America explain what socialism means to them', 4 May 2020
- 'Socialist Feminism: What is it and how can it replace corporate "Girl Boss" feminism?', 5 May 2020
- 'Julia Salazar explains what it means to be a Democratic Socialist lawmaker', 6 May 2020
- 'Socialist policies could have helped the United States during the Coronavirus pandemic', 7 May 2020
- 'What socialism has to do with the U.S. labor movement', 8 May 2020
- 'Class solidarity: What it is and how you can engage in it', 2 June 2020
- 'Progressive youth activists founded "Our Time" to build on Bernie Sanders's message', 9 July 2020
- 'What "capitalism" is and how it affects people', 25 August 2020
- 'How White Supremacy and capitalism influence beauty standards', 19 October 2020
- 'Bolivian Socialists are claiming victory in a major election following a right-wing coup', 19 October 2020
- 'Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker Movement, was a radical activist', 27 November 2020
- 'TikTok's black leftist hype house shares the history of black radicalism', 10 February 2021

This may have cost them some of their youngest readers, making the name *Teen Vogue* something of a misnomer, but in exchange, they seem to have

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won plenty of readers in their 20s, and possibly (an exact breakdown is not available) even in their 30s.<sup>16</sup> Views that were once associated with fringe groups such as the Socialist Workers Party now have mass market appeal.

One should, of course, not read too much into the rebranding of a fashion magazine. *Teen Vogue* is one magazine among many, and we do not know how many of its readers skip the political content and go straight to the fashion and celebrities sections. Is 'Generation Left' a genuine phenomenon? Or is it mostly media hype?

The problem with broad-brush narratives, be it the old 'The young are apathetic and have no interest in anything that does not directly concern them', or the new 'The young are overzealous woke communists', is, of course, that they can quickly become self-perpetuating. Once they feel sufficiently familiar, they start to feed on themselves.

Today, when a group of student activists demand the removal of a statue, the renaming of a building, or the no-platforming of a speaker, this can easily become a national news story, because it feeds into a familiar 'Woke Millennials are re-enacting Mao's Cultural Revolution' narrative. Twenty or even ten years ago, it might have just gone unnoticed, or been dismissed as a silly, irrelevant stunt.<sup>17</sup>

In 2018, a student society (Goldsmith University's LGBTQ+ Society) posted a string of tweets defending the Soviet Gulag camps. Had this happened just five years earlier, it is quite unlikely that it would have been of interest to any national newspaper or magazine. 'Members of a small student group say silly things' is not much of a story. And yet, in this case, the

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16 'Teen Vogue and the death of women's media', *Washington Examiner*, 19 October 2018 (<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/teen-vogue-and-the-death-of-womens-media>).

17 On an anecdotal note: the author of this paper attended an event in 2003, at the Humboldt University Berlin, as an undergraduate student, during which one speaker, Berlin's then Senator of Finance Thilo Sarrazin, was constantly heckled, disrupted and shouted down by the audience. Were this to happen today, it would almost certainly be reported in several national newspapers as an attempt to 'no-platform' or 'cancel' that speaker, approvingly by some, and disapprovingly by others. Back then, only one local newspaper ran a short article on the subject, written in a very un-Culture-War-like, detached tone. The national press, and most of the local/regional press, had little interest in anything that happened on university campuses.

issue was covered in the *Sun*,<sup>18</sup> *Daily Mail*,<sup>19</sup> *Telegraph*,<sup>20</sup> *Times*,<sup>21</sup> *Daily Express*<sup>22</sup> and *Spectator*.<sup>23</sup> None of these publications claimed that Goldsmith's LGBTQ+ Society was representative of the Millennial generation and/or Generation Z. The story was not 'The young are turning to Stalinism'. But it now felt like an extreme outgrowth of a more general and familiar trend, unrepresentative in this extreme form, but nonetheless not entirely unexpected. And that is what made it a story.

It is, in other words, quite hard to separate the noise from the signal. Are the younger generations really that much more politicised, and more likely to embrace radical left-wing ideas, than they were ten or twenty years ago? Or are we just paying more attention to examples which fit that description?

This paper will try to bring greater clarity on this matter by looking at it in a more systematic way. Its approach is a very simple one. We will begin by explaining why these trends matter, and why supporters of the market economy should take them seriously. We will then go on to summarise some of the existing opinion research on the political thinking of the younger generations in the relevant areas. Finally, we will build on that by presenting new findings from a Forefront Market Research poll that has been specifically commissioned by the Institute of Economic Affairs for the purpose of filling gaps in the existing research. We will focus far more on economic issues than on 'culture war' issues, although the two are not entirely separable, and a lot of culture war issues have an economic core. We will also mostly focus on the UK, although 'Millennial Socialism' is an international trend, and what we describe here will have its parallels elsewhere.

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- 18 'Stalin's student supporters. Hard-left students at Goldsmiths University bizarrely defend Stalin's gulags where MILLIONS of people died', *The Sun*, 12 September 2018 (<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/7235844/students-defend-gulags-millions-died/>).
- 19 "'The Soviet Union was committed to rehabilitation": Fury as hard-left student group at London university mounts extraordinary defence of notorious GULAG worker camps', *Daily Mail*, 11 September 2018 (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6154777/Goldsmiths-student-group-mounts-extraordinary-defence-notorious-GULAG-worker-camps.html>).
- 20 'Gulags were "compassionate", "educational" institutions, say trans rights campaigners', *The Telegraph*, 11 September 2018 (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/09/11/soviet-labour-camps-compassionate-educational-institutions-say/>).
- 21 'LGBTQ+ society: gulags were enriching', *The Times*, 12 September 2018 (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lgbt-society-gulags-were-enriching-mfzdxrwc>).
- 22 "'I CANNOT believe what I have just read!" Student group BANNED after DEFENDING Gulag camps', *Daily Express*, 12 September 2018 (<https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1016635/goldsmiths-university-stalin-gulag-russia-history>).
- 23 'Goldsmiths student group: Gulags "actually a compassionate, non-violent course of action"', *Spectator*, 11 September 2018 (<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/goldsmiths-student-group-gulags-actually-a-compassionate-non-violent-course-of-action->).

The general verdict of this study is that the 'Generation Left' narrative contains a lot of truth, even if the reality is messier, and there are a lot of ambiguities, contradictions and inconsistencies in the data. The younger generations really do tend to be quite hostile to the market economy and sympathetic to socialist ideas.

The main argument of this report is *not* that Britain is full of committed young Marxist-Leninists, or that a socialist revolution is just around the corner. It is *not* that supporters of the market economy should despair and throw in the towel. Anti-capitalist, pro-socialist attitudes are widespread, but they are also thinly spread. They often seem to be no more than skin-deep. These are not necessarily entrenched views (yet), which people are no longer prepared to reconsider. But they are, for now, the popular default position. They may still change, but they will not just change on their own. For supporters of capitalism (broadly defined), the findings presented in this paper are not a reason to panic, but they should act as a wake-up call. It should concern them that the economic system to which the country owes its relative prosperity is so unpopular, and that an alternative which has such an abysmal track record is so popular.

The rejection of capitalism may never have huge real-world consequences. 'We should ditch capitalism, and try a socialist alternative' may well be the political equivalent of 'One day, I will learn a foreign language, run a marathon, and write a novel'. It may be an idea that is popular as an abstract aspiration, but less so as a concrete action plan.

But then, before 2016, that was exactly the way a lot of EU supporters thought about the prospect of what would soon become known as 'Brexit'. They were perfectly aware that most of their compatriots did not identify very much with the European project and that Britain would never be a nation of Europhiles. But they also believed that it ultimately did not matter, because latent hostility to the EU would never turn into active resistance. Expressions of anti-EU sentiments, they thought, were just idle talk. The absence of a well-thought-out alternative, combined with the risks associated with leaving and the fact that most opponents of the EU were simply not passionate enough about the issue, were deemed sufficient to guarantee Britain's place in the EU.

For a long time, that was true. Until it suddenly no longer was.

## Why it matters

It is easy to go along with media-driven hype, without bothering to check to what extent it is actually true. But it is just as easy to dismiss a phenomenon as just that – media hype – without checking whether it might not be more than that. Confronted with evidence of young people turning against capitalism, supporters of the market economy have tended to do the latter. They have tended to bury their heads in the sand and insist that it is not really happening.

Chances are that the reader will have come across at least one of the following responses to the ‘Generation Left’ phenomenon:

- ‘Young people have always gone through a left-wing phase. Think of all the student radicals of the 1960s and 1970s, with their Mao badges and Ho Chi Minh chants. Did they become revolutionaries? No – they grew up. As will the current lot. They will grow out of it. Wait until they leave university, and enter the real world’.
- ‘A few loudmouths on social media do not speak for an entire generation. Social media is just a left-wing echo chamber. Most young people do not care about any of this stuff. They just want to be left alone, and get on with their lives’.
- ‘This talk about “Generation This”, “Generation That”, is a whole load of nonsense. Your views are not determined by your birthyear. There is at least as much variation within age groups as there is between them’.
- ‘You can show anything with polls. It simply depends on how you ask the question. Phrase it differently, and you get a different answer’.
- ‘Young people may say that they hate capitalism, but talk is cheap, and actions speak louder than words. They post their anti-capitalist slogans on an iPhone, while eating a pizza they ordered on Deliveroo,

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and then they go on to do some online shopping. They are the most capitalist generation ever – in deeds. Just not in words’.

In the author’s view, these objections are all profoundly mistaken. They are coping mechanisms to avoid an uncomfortable reality. We will address them in turn.

### ***‘They will grow out of it’***

Statements of the first variety are essentially paraphrasing the old adage that ‘If a man is not a socialist by the time he is 20, he has no heart; if he is still a socialist by the time he is 40, he has no brain’. But there are major problems with attempts to apply this folk wisdom to the current situation.

For a start, it seems to be based on a misunderstanding about what exactly a ‘Millennial’ is. Defining generations is a convention, not a science, so there are no official definitions, and no hard-and-fast dividing lines. But the term ‘Millennials’ generally refers to people born between the early 1980s and the mid-to-late 1990s. Pew Research Center for example, uses the following birthyear ranges:

1928 – 1945 — Silent Generation  
1946 – 1964 — Baby Boomers  
1965 – 1980 — Generation X  
1981 – 1996 — Millennials  
1997 – 20?? — Generation Z

This means that in 2021, there is no such thing as a ‘20-year-old Millennial’ anymore. The oldest Millennials have already turned 40, and in that age group, as we will see, support for socialist ideas remains alive and well.

We therefore cannot dismiss these people’s opinions with phrases like ‘They are just going through a phase’ or ‘They will grow out of it’, as if we were talking about a teenager in a Che Guevara-shirt. It is true that socialist ideas are most popular among the young, but that is ‘the young’ in the very broadest sense – ‘the young’ in the sense of ‘people up to their early 40s’, not ‘the young’ in the sense of ‘recent school leavers’.

It is true that in previous generations many people flirted with socialist ideas in their youth and later abandoned them. The most obvious example

is the Baby Boomer generation, famous for the student radicalism of the late 1960s and 1970s, a period when ‘Ho Chi Minh Thought’ and ‘Mao Zedong Thought’ were in vogue on Western campuses. On a smaller scale and less well-documented, something similar happened in the ‘Red Decade’ of the 1930s, which saw a wave of euphoria for the Soviet Union among educated Westerners (Hollander 1990: 102-176; Niemietz 2019: 63-86). But we cannot deduce from these two observations that this is some iron law of nature and assume that every generation will mechanically repeat the same process. Indeed, for the generations following the Baby Boomers, we no longer see any evidence of a similar trajectory. As the author Ed West (2020: 2) points out (although more with regard to social issues than economic issues):

By my late thirties I realised [...] [that] almost none of my contemporaries was going to become more conservative; if anything, they had turned more Left-wing than they were ten or twenty years earlier, as the barometer of what is progressive and therefore socially acceptable had shifted. [...]

Surveys show that those from Generation X [...] were actually moving to the Left as they got older [...]

The same thing was happening with [...] Millennials [...] who were not showing any signs of becoming more Right-wing as they aged.

This, in a nutshell, is why the opinions of the younger generations matter, and why we have chosen to focus on them in this paper. It is not that the opinions of younger people are intrinsically more interesting than the opinions of other age groups. But if the opinions of younger people are already relatively settled, rather than just a transitory phase (and so far, it very much looks that way), then what we present in this paper is not just a snapshot of the opinions of one randomly picked subgroup of the population. Rather, it is a preview of what will be the mainstream opinion in Britain tomorrow.

### ***‘Social media is not the real world’***

The ‘Generation Left’ narrative is, to some extent, driven by social media activism. Its main protagonists are highly active on social media – especially on the most political social media platform, Twitter – and they often have dedicated online fan clubs of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of

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followers. Social media users are a self-selected group, and therefore, by definition, not representative of the population as a whole. This is why, in this paper, we will draw on representative surveys of randomly selected audiences, not on social media trends.

Nonetheless, it is facile to dismiss social media as ‘just a bubble’ or ‘just a left-wing echo chamber’. What makes social media unrepresentative is, above all, the demographic composition of its users, which is heavily biased towards younger generations. Among British people over the age of 75, only one in ten use Twitter (Cast From Clay 2018). That share rises to one in five among those aged 65 to 75, one in three among those aged 55 to 64, just over half among those aged 45 to 54, and two out of three among those aged 18 to 44 (ibid.). Thus, in the UK, most Zoomers, most Millennials, and a slim majority of Generation X-ers, use Twitter. It may be unrepresentative of the population as a whole, but it is considerably less unrepresentative of the younger generations.

Needless to say, these figures include large numbers of people who use Twitter only sporadically, as well as people who use it to tweet about football rather than to discuss Marx’s *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*. Twitter as such may not be that unrepresentative, but ‘Political Twitter’ is.

But then, social trends are almost always, at least initially, driven by small and ‘unrepresentative’ minorities of committed individuals. This is no less true of political trends. As F. A. Hayek pointed out over 70 years ago (2005 [1949]: 105-106):

Socialism has never and nowhere been at first a working-class movement. [...] [I]t required long efforts by the intellectuals before the working classes could be persuaded [...] In every country that has moved toward socialism, the phase of the development in which socialism becomes a determining influence on politics has been preceded for many years by a period during which socialist ideals governed the thinking of the more active intellectuals. [...] [I]t is merely a question of time until the views now held by the intellectuals become the governing force of politics.

Hayek described this group, which he called ‘the intellectuals’ or ‘the second-hand dealers in ideas’, in the following way (ibid.: 107):

The typical intellectual need be neither [original thinker nor scholar or expert in a particular field of thought]: he need not possess special knowledge of anything in particular, nor need he even be particularly intelligent, to perform his role as intermediary in the spreading of ideas. What qualifies him for his job is the wide range of subjects on which he can readily talk and write, and a position or habits through which he becomes acquainted with new ideas sooner than those to whom he addresses himself.

While this passage predates Twitter by more than half a century, it nonetheless reads like an almost perfect description of a typical 'blue tick' Twitter user today.<sup>24</sup>

The main professions that Hayek included in this group were 'journalists, teachers, ministers, lecturers, publicists, radio commentators, writers of fiction, cartoonists, and artists', as well as 'many professional men and technicians, such as scientists and doctors, who [...] become carriers of new ideas outside their own fields' (ibid.: 107-108). This list may look a bit dated, and we can argue about who exactly constitute the modern-day 'second-hand dealers in ideas', in the Hayekian sense. But there is no way an updated version of Hayek's analysis would not include high-profile Twitter users.

Supporters of the market economy often treat Twitter as a digital Las Vegas, in that they seem to believe that what happens on Twitter stays on Twitter. There is, however, no firewall between Twitter and 'the real world'. Last summer, a long-standing *New York Times* journalist resigned from the paper in protest against its 'Twitterisation'. In her resignation letter, she explained:

Twitter is not on the masthead of The New York Times. But Twitter has become its ultimate editor. As the ethics and mores of that platform have become those of the paper, the paper itself has increasingly become a kind of performance space.<sup>25</sup>

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24 The 'blue tick' is a verification badge, which, as the company explains, 'lets people know that an account of public interest is authentic. To receive the blue badge, your account must be authentic, notable, and active'.

25 'Resignation letter - Bari Weiss', 14 July 2020 (<https://www.bariweiss.com/resignation-letter>).

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***“Generations” is an artificial category***

Some have questioned the usefulness of the concept of ‘generations’ altogether. Is your social class not a more meaningful predictor of your attitudes than the generation you belong to? How about the graduate vs. non-graduate divide, the metropolitan vs. small-town/rural divide, white British vs. BAME and/or foreign-born, etc?

However, for the purposes of this paper, we do not need to get into philosophical arguments about identity. We do not need to imagine ‘generations’ as cohesive groups. We only need to acknowledge the existence of peer group effects (the attitudes of someone in their early 20s are more likely to be influenced by other people in their early 20s than by their grandparents) and of cohort effects. The point is simply that when opinion surveys include a breakdown by age, they often show large and systematic differences between age groups. We also have longitudinal studies, which follow cohorts over time in order to document how their views evolve over time, and how they compare to those of previous generations when they were at the same age. This allows us to distinguish between the (transient) effects of age per se, and effects which ‘travel’ with a cohort throughout much of their lives.

There is, of course, more variation within each age group than there is between them. But then, we could say the same about any large, non-selective group, such as ‘men’ or ‘the British’. Whatever traits we may consider ‘typically male’ or ‘typically British’, it will always be true to say that plenty of people outside of those groups possess those traits too, while plenty of people within them lack them. But it does not follow that ‘gender is a social construct’, or that ‘Britishness’ is not real. It does not follow that those categories are not useful.

It is hard to establish causal relations for intergenerational differences in attitudes, and for the purposes of this paper, it is not really necessary either. But there are at least plausible starting points. Today’s younger people have no memories of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end-of-history feeling that followed it. They experienced the Financial Crisis of 2008/09 and its aftermath during a relatively early stage of their careers, so they have not had that sense of living through a prolonged period of relative economic success and stability. At least in Britain, those generations have never known a period of cheap housing. They are far more likely than previous generations to attend, or have attended, university. We need not buy into the idea, popular with the right-wing press, that

universities are left-wing indoctrination factories. But it does mean that young people tend to spend much more time around agemates, when they might previously have entered a mixed-age workplace. Social media further amplifies this trend, by creating much larger, and permanently accessible, virtual peer groups.

None of this makes any of the trends discussed in this paper inevitable. People can have similar experiences, and nonetheless draw completely different conclusions from them. But there is such a thing as a 'default interpretation' of events, 'default opinions', and a 'default worldview'. And it matters what those are.

### ***'You can show anything with polls'***

A common response to polling data which show us results we dislike is to question the validity of polling altogether. Does it not simply depend on how you ask the question? Have polls not proved wrong many times in recent years?

This response is a subcategory of 'Lies, damn lies, and statistics', a supposedly 'witty' marker of 'critical thinking', which, in practice, often just serves as a lazy excuse to dismiss uncomfortable evidence.

Of course there are plenty of shoddy and misleading polls. But the point is that those are not that hard to spot. They are usually shoddy and misleading in similar ways.

Some polls ask leading questions, which nudge respondents towards a particular answer. Some polls fail to take 'Social Desirability Bias' into account, the tendency for people to say what they feel socially obliged to say, rather than what they truly believe. Some polls ask unclear questions, which means that, in effect, different respondents answer different questions. Some polling questions are too narrow and specific, some are too broad and general. But none of this is a reason to dismiss polling altogether. It is merely a reason to take a closer look at what the poll actually asks.

It is probably unwise to rely too heavily on polls when a few percentage points make all the difference. Polls which predicted an outcome of 52 per cent Remain vs. 48 per cent Leave in the EU Referendum were only off by a few percentage points, but they nonetheless 'failed' to predict Brexit. For the purposes of this paper, however, this is not an issue. A poll

may find that opinion X is held by 70.4 per cent of the public, when the true figure is 66.1 per cent or 74.8 per cent, but either way, the important result is that there is a solid majority for X.

In addition, in this paper, we are not going to place too much faith in any one particular poll – not even the one we commissioned ourselves. We are, instead, looking for results that remain broadly consistent across a variety of polls.

***‘The young already embrace capitalism, even if they say otherwise’***

Supporters of the market economy find it baffling how someone can enjoy all the comforts and conveniences of modern capitalism, and then still reject it. Why would you advocate killing the goose that lays the golden eggs?

But this is only baffling if we assume that a non-capitalist economy would not be able to produce comparable comforts and conveniences. Those who reject capitalism obviously do not share that assumption. They obviously do not associate their preferred alternative with shortages, breadlines and monotony – if they did, it would not *be* their preferred alternative. They either assume that the supply of goods and services is independent of the economic system, or that a non-capitalist economy would produce even greater abundance. Indeed, one of the manifestos of ‘Millennial Socialism’ comes with the title *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (Bastani 2019).

Given what over a century of economic history has taught us, supporters of the market economy are on stronger ground here, to say the very least. But however mistaken the idea that a non-capitalist economy could deliver anything like the living standards we enjoy today – it is nonetheless a sincerely held belief. It is therefore profoundly wrong to interpret the usage of iPhones, ride-sharing apps and delivery services as an implicit endorsement of capitalism.

The short summary of this section is that insofar as polling data show a hegemony of anti-capitalist opinions among younger generations, supporters of the market economy should treat that as a challenge and take it seriously. They should stop looking for flimsy reasons to dismiss it and pretend it is not happening.

For now, this may not matter too much. The median age in the UK is just over 40 years, which means that Millennials and adult Zoomers represent less than half of the total adult population. But the direction of travel is clear. As time goes by, their share of the adult population is bound to increase, and unless we see major attitudinal changes in the meantime, the 'typical Millennial/Zoomer opinion' of today is the 'typical British opinion' of tomorrow.

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# What do we know? A review of recent attitude studies and surveys

It is hard to find many representative surveys from before 2016 which specifically ask people about their opinion on socialism. Until then, socialism was simply considered a bit of a niche topic. Since then, however, surveys of this kind have proliferated, and that is in itself a sign of the times. In this section, we will review some of the most relevant surveys on the subject.

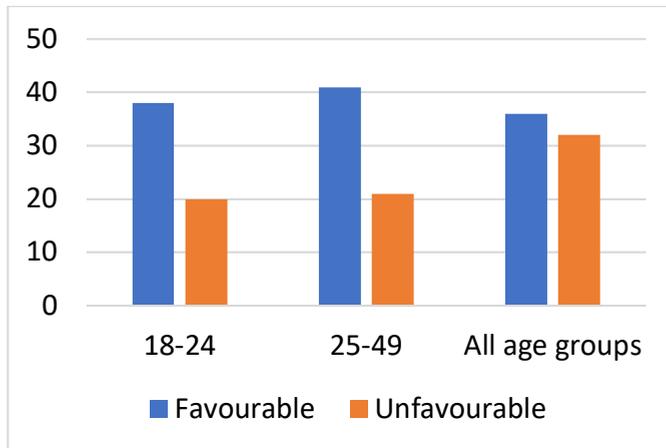
## **YouGov (2016)**

In 2016, a YouGov survey on socialism made a bit of a splash, because it found, as the *Independent* reported, that 'British people prefer socialism to capitalism': '[S]ocialism is growing in popularity after years of being treated with suspicion because of its connection to the Soviet Union and the Cold War'.<sup>26</sup>

More precisely, it found that socialism had marginally more supporters than critics in Britain (36 per cent vs. 33 per cent), while capitalism had more critics than supporters (39 per cent vs. 33 per cent). Importantly for our purposes, these figures masked substantial variation by age. Among people in their late teens, twenties, thirties and forties (i.e. early Zoomers, Millennials and late Gen-X-ers), socialism had twice as many supporters as it had critics (see Figure 1).

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<sup>26</sup> 'Socialism "more popular" with British public than capitalism, survey finds', *Independent*, 24 February 2016 (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/socialism-more-popular-british-public-capitalism-survey-finds-a6892371.html>).

**Figure 1: Opinion of socialism by age**

Source: YouGov (2016)

In those age groups, people were also less likely to have a favourable opinion of capitalism. However, this was mostly because of a higher proportion of people answering 'Not sure', not because of a higher net disapproval of capitalism.

The YouGov survey is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, although YouGov do not provide a definition of socialism, the fact that they plot socialism directly against capitalism makes it reasonably clear that in this context, 'socialism' and 'capitalism' are understood as two distinct economic systems. It should be clear enough that in this context, 'socialism' does not simply mean 'something warm and fluffy', or 'something to do with sharing and being nice to workers'.

Secondly, we see no difference between the responses of the very young and the responses of the not-quite-so-young-anymore. This contradicts the idea that this is 'just a phase' and that young people will 'grow out of it'. In terms of attitudes to socialism, 40 is the new 20.

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### ***Opinium and Social Market Foundation (2016)***

Some studies of public attitudes do not just ask how many people agree or disagree with a particular position, but also look at how attitudes are correlated across different subject areas. Do people who hold Opinion X also tend to hold Opinion Y, or are X-ers and Y-ers distinct groups? Studies of that kind can identify 'opinion clusters' and split the population into a number of ideological 'tribes' on that basis. This can be on the basis of where people stand on specific policies (e.g. nationalisations, immigration controls), or on the basis of broader values that have no immediate policy implications (e.g. whether people consider themselves 'patriotic') – or a combination of both. It can also include some measure of how politically active and engaged people are.

This type of 'cluster analysis' allows us to go beyond the one-dimensional Left-vs-Right axis. When we use the latter framework, we already start with fixed categories, and then try to assign people to them. We already start with an implicit expectation of what constitutes a typical 'bundle of opinions', and when opinions bundle differently in practice, we have to explain that in roundabout terms, such as by labelling somebody as 'economically left-wing, but culturally right-wing'. With cluster analysis, there are no such prior expectations. The clusters simply depend on the responses people give.

The study *Dead Centre: redefining the centre of British politics*, by Opinium and the Social Market Foundation, falls into that category (Kirkup 2016). Based on people's opinions on various policy issues (most of them fairly specific and topical), they split the British electorate into eight tribes, which they label 'Democratic Socialists', 'Progressives', 'Community', 'Swing voters', 'New Britain', 'Free Liberals', 'Common Sense' and 'Our Britain'.

Of these tribes, the one that comes closest to the stereotype of the 'woke socialist Millennial' is the 'Democratic Socialists', with the 'Progressives' not that far behind. These groups consistently favour interventionist economic policies, and they combine that with a progressive outlook on social issues. For our purposes, we can think of them as one single tribe, because the disagreements between them seem to be mostly about party-political allegiances (an area which we will not concern ourselves with here). Taken together, they account for about one fifth of the total population, and a much higher share of the younger population. They are by no means all Millennials, but nearly three quarters of them are under the age of 55.

There are two more tribes which frequently, if less consistently, support interventionist economic policies: 'Community' and 'Our Britain'. However, unlike Democratic Socialists and Progressives, they combine their economic interventionism with a nationalistic and socially conservative outlook. (Again, one could arguably have merged those two groups into one single tribe.) This highlights the fact that we cannot simply assume that anti-capitalist economic attitudes must go hand in hand with 'woke', progressive social attitudes. In this paper, though, we will pay far more attention to progressive socialists than to socially conservative ones, for the simple reason that the two groups cluster at opposite ends of the age spectrum.

### ***Legatum Institute (2017)***

Where surveys mislead, the reason is often that organisations with a clear ideological position attempt to make their own opinions appear more popular than they truly are, in the hope that *presenting* them as popular will help to actually *make* them popular. This makes the study *Public opinion in the post-Brexit era: Economic attitudes in modern Britain*, published by the Legatum Institute, particularly interesting. Written by two authors with a clearly recognisable pro-market outlook, it nonetheless comes to the conclusion that that outlook is not widely shared in Britain.

As one of the authors, Matthew Elliott, puts it: 'I believe that free enterprise policies are a key driver of prosperity. Sadly though, it appears that a large proportion of British voters do not share this view' (Elliott and Kanagasooriam 2017: 3).

They do not ask people whether they approve or disapprove of socialism or capitalism; instead, they ask respondents for their associations with those terms. It amounts to the same thing, because most of the top associations with capitalism are unambiguously negative ('greedy', 'selfish', 'corrupt') and most of the top associations with socialism are unambiguously positive ('for the greater good', 'delivers most for most people', 'fair') (ibid: 8-14).

They then present respondents with, respectively, two conflicting response options on 17 economic policy issues, one of which could be broadly described as 'capitalist' and one of which could be broadly described as 'socialist'. The more socialist response option turns out to be the more popular one in 16 out of 17 cases, usually with very comfortable margins (ibid: 18-24). Younger people are slightly more likely to be drawn to socialist

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positions, but in this study, this effect is neither consistent, nor large, so we do not find much evidence of a generational gap.

Consistent with many other surveys, the authors find widespread support for industry nationalisations (ibid.: 14-18). The extent of this varies hugely from industry to industry, but even where there is no overall pro-nationalisation majority, there is always at least a sizable minority which believes that the respective industry should be run by the state. One could probably make up a non-existent industry and find at least one in four people demanding its nationalisation.

Finally, like *Opinium* in the study discussed above, the authors also perform a cluster analysis to split the population into five different political 'tribes', which they label the 'Cosmopolitan Critics', the 'Left Behind', the 'Disengaged Pessimists', the 'Optimistic Centrists' and the 'Right of Centre Traditionalists'. Out of these, it is the 'Cosmopolitan Critics' who come closest to the stereotype of the 'woke socialist Millennial' (ibid.: 36):

Cosmopolitan critics are anti-capitalist, anti-free enterprise and [...] extremely socially liberal [...] Capitalism is viewed very negatively, and they are the most likely segment to describe socialism as 'delivering for most people'.

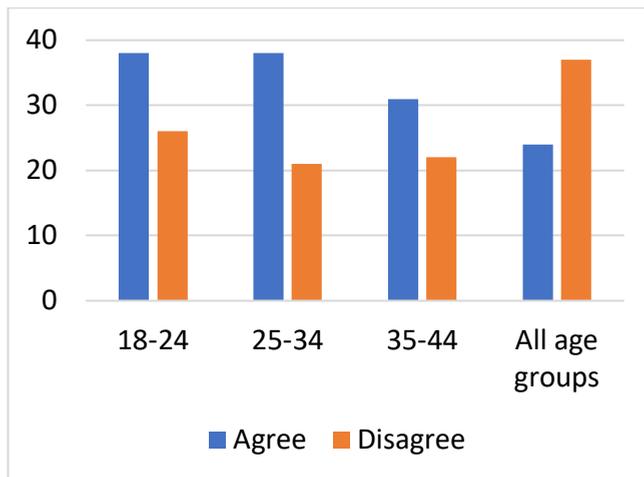
Among the population as a whole, only about one in six people fall into this category, but that share is higher among Millennials and Zoomers. The authors do not provide an exact demographic breakdown, but they note that Cosmopolitan Critics are '[s]lightly younger than [the] population overall' (ibid.). This suggests, once again, that these attitudes are more common among the young, but this refers to 'the young' in the very broadest sense, not in the sense of 'the very youngest'.

Two other tribes, the 'Left Behind' and the 'Disengaged Pessimists', also display predominantly negative attitudes towards capitalism, but unlike the Cosmopolitan Critics, they combine those with a nationalistic and socially conservative outlook. This highlights, again, that there is such a thing as a 'socialism of the Right'. Across the population as a whole, it is at least as common as the progressive socialism of the Left, and perhaps more so. For the purposes of this paper, however, the latter is vastly more relevant, because its proponents tend to be younger, while the proponents of the former tend to be middle-aged or older.

### **Number Cruncher Politics and CapX (2018)**

In 2018, Number Cruncher Politics carried out a poll in cooperation with CapX, in which they asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement 'Communism could have worked if it had been better executed'. Among the population as a whole, one in four agreed, while more than one in three disagreed (see Figure 2). Among Millennials, early Zoomers and late Gen-Xers, however, we get a very different picture. Among people up to their mid-30s, almost two out of five agreed with this statement, while fewer than one in four disagreed. Again, we find no huge differences between the youngest and the not-quite-so-young-anymore. Net agreement is lower in the age group from 35-44, but still clearly positive. If we want to see net disapproval, we have to look higher up the age scale. So again, there is better evidence for the '40 is the new 20' hypothesis than for the 'They will grow out of it' hypothesis.

**Figure 2: Communism could have worked if it had been better executed**



They also ask whether people have a positive or a negative opinion of socialism. This study finds similar levels of support for socialism among the young as the above-mentioned YouGov (2016) survey. However, unlike the latter, they also find about as many young people who express a negative opinion.

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### ***Ipsos MORI (2018)***

2018 was also the bicentenary of the birth of Karl Marx, an occasion which Ipsos MORI marked with a global poll entitled ‘Attitudes towards socialist ideals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’. (Their overall verdict: ‘World divided on socialism, 200 years after birth of Karl Marx’<sup>27</sup>).

They show that in the UK, about half of the population agree with the statement that ‘at present, socialist ideals are of great value for societal progress’, which is about in line with the global average (Ipsos MORI 2018). 42 per cent think that ‘socialism is a system of political oppression, mass surveillance and state terror’. This is below the global average and well below the share of respondents in ex-socialist countries such as Poland and Romania who take this view. But it is still higher than what one might have expected given the previous surveys. A third of respondents believe that the ‘working classes are well represented in our political system’, again in line with the global average.

Unfortunately, the Ipsos MORI poll does not contain a breakdown by age.

### ***More in Common (2020)***

The study *Britain’s Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain*, published by More in Common (2020), also performs a cluster analysis, in this case on the basis of broad values and general attitudes rather than agreement or disagreement with specific policies. They split Britain into seven tribes, which they label ‘Progressive Activists’, ‘Civic Pragmatists’, ‘Disengaged Battlers’, ‘Established Liberals’, ‘Loyal Nationals’, ‘Disengaged Traditionalists’ and ‘Backbone Conservatives’.

The first of these tribes, the ‘Progressive Activists’, are a very good approximation of the ‘Generation Left’ archetype (Juan-Torres et al. 2020: 39):

Progressive Activists’ sense of personal identity is connected to their strong political and social beliefs. [...] They are especially vocal in debates on social media and are comfortable making their voices heard. On many issues, they hold stronger views than any other

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27 ‘World divided on socialism, 200 years after birth of Karl Marx’, Ipsos MORI, 2 May 2018 (<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/world-divided-socialism-200-years-after-birth-karl-marx>).

group. [...] Progressive Activists are motivated by the pursuit of social justice. They are highly committed to gender and racial equality, embrace diversity, and [...] favour government policies that intervene in markets [...]

They are critical of Britain's responsibility for historic injustices and the legacy of the British Empire. They think that a person's outcomes in life are determined more by the social structures in which they grow up than by their individual efforts. [...] Key concerns for this group are the impacts of climate change, austerity, and racism.

Among the population as a whole, only about one in eight people belong to this tribe (see Figure 3). However, among people aged 25-44, this share is closer to one in five, and among people aged 18-24, it is almost one in four (ibid.: 278). Thus, equating the entire Millennial generation (plus the early Zoomers) with this group, which is what the 'Generation Left' moniker effectively does, may be a bit of a stretch – but neither are they some wildly unrepresentative fringe group.

We can add the 'Civic Pragmatists', who are the less militant cousins of the 'Progressive Activists', to the anti-capitalist camp (ibid.: 43):

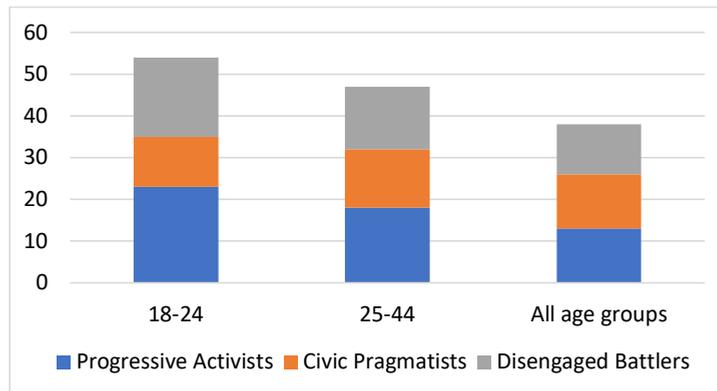
While they [Civic Pragmatists] have a lot of common ground with Progressive Activists, they hold their views less intensely and [...] [t]hey value compromise with others, believe in working towards consensus.

They account for another 13 per cent of the population, and they are one of the few tribes that are more or less evenly distributed across the generations.

There are two further groups which regularly, if less consistently, display hostile attitudes towards capitalism: the 'Disengaged Battlers' and the 'Loyal Nationals'. 'Disengaged Battlers' are (paradoxical though this may sound) the apolitical version of the Progressive Activists, in the sense that they are less firm in their views, and care less strongly about them, but still share many of the same assumptions. This group is clearly skewed towards the young: one in five Zoomers, but only one in fourteen Boomers, fall into this category.

The 'Loyal Nationals' represent, once again, the 'socialism of the Right', that is, they combine anti-capitalism with social conservatism and nationalism. Again, this group is heavily skewed towards the older generations (one in four Boomers, but only one in thirty Zoomers, fall into this category), so they are not especially relevant for the purposes of this paper.

**Figure 3: Progressive 'tribes' critical of the market economy**



In this case, we do see a small difference between the very young and the not-quite-so-young anymore, but we are still closer to '40 is the new 20' than to 'They will grow out of it'.

In general, this study does not make for comfortable reading for those who believe in free-market liberalism. It finds that (ibid.: 84):

On the economic left-right scale, the UK as a whole leans towards the left, favouring redistribution of wealth and believing that workers do not get a fair share of the nation's wealth. Just 4 per cent of Britons are classifiable as 'right' on this scale. [...]

[O]n the libertarian-authoritarian scale [...] two-thirds of Britons belong in the centre [...], but almost all others hold authoritarian rather than libertarian views.

### **C|T Group (2021)**

In 2021, Lisi Christofferson and Adrian Flook of C|T Group (2021) conducted a study on public attitudes towards capitalism and socialism, which they presented in the webinar 'The case for capitalism. Research and strategy presentation'.

They show that, across the population as a whole, not many people would describe themselves as either 'socialists' or 'capitalists': just under one in six people each. Net favourability of both systems is therefore close to zero, which is not that different from the above-mentioned surveys by YouGov (2016) and Number Cruncher Politics (2018).

However, most people clearly have positive associations with the label 'socialism', even if they do not wish to adopt it wholesale as a self-description. The authors present several adjectives or brief descriptions, and ask respondents how strongly they associate them with either capitalism, socialism, or with neither of the two. As in the case of the YouGov survey, the authors do not specifically define 'socialism', or ask respondents what that term means to them. However, the fact that they explicitly pit socialism and capitalism against each other in this way should make it clear enough that in this context, 'socialism' is understood to be an alternative economic system, not just some fuzzy buzzword.

Descriptors that people strongly associate with capitalism include 'Only focuses on profits', 'Best for businesses' and 'Puts power into the hands of the few' (ibid.). There are a few positive associations as well, namely 'Opportunity', 'Wages' and 'Job creation'. However, in these cases, the association is weak.

Socialism is strongly associated with 'Promotes social responsibility' and 'Works for everyone irrespective of background or class'. There are a few negative associations as well, such as 'limits personal freedom', but that association is weak.

Terms that supporters of the market economy would very strongly associate with socialism, such as 'Proven to fail', 'Inefficient and wasteful', and 'Bureaucratic', are associated with neither.

The remainder of the survey shows, once again, that free-market economics is not popular in Britain. For example, most people believe that businesses should be responsible to 'Society in general', 'Their customers' and 'Their

employees', and only then to 'Their shareholders and owners'. Three out of five believe that businesses should be more regulated, while only one in fourteen believe in deregulation.

The C|T Group study also contains a cluster analysis, where they split the population into four tribes, this time specifically with regard to their attitudes to capitalism. They find that about one in five people need not much persuasion of the benefits of capitalism, because they are already fairly comfortable with it. At the opposite end of the spectrum, one in four people are so hostile to capitalism that there is not much point trying to persuade them. Of the remainder, two thirds are ambivalent and potentially persuadable, while one third are disengaged.

The authors do not provide an exact demographic breakdown, but they note that the majority of the people in the pro-capitalist camp are over the age of 55, while about half of the people in the anti-capitalist camp are under the age of 45. So again, while anti-capitalists are clearly, on average, significantly younger than pro-capitalists, anti-capitalism is by no means limited to the very youngest. It can therefore not be brushed aside with the rhetoric of 'They are just going through a phase' or 'They will grow out of it'.

### ***Conclusion***

Taken together, we do not get a very consistent picture from these studies. Different surveys produce different results even when they ask similarly worded questions, and even more so when they do not. It is rarely clear what explains these differences.

But neither are the survey results all over the place. It is not that one study suggests that Britain is on the brink of a Bolshevik revolution, while the next study suggests that the young are radical free-marketeters. The exact numbers differ from study to study, but some broad trends remain the same. It is safe to say that socialism and socialist policies are popular among younger people. They enjoy the support of at least a significant minority, and once we filter out the undecided and the indifferent, they probably enjoy majority support among the remainder.

It is also safe to say that this is not just true among recent school leavers, but also among people in their 20s, 30s and probably early 40s. There are no large differences between the economic attitudes of the very young,

and the not-quite-so-young-anymore. Suppose the polling results were broken down by birth year, and in a blind test you had to guess what age group you are looking at. You would be able to narrow it down: you would be able to tell whether you are looking at the responses of Millennials or of Baby Boomers. But you would not be able to tell whether you are looking at the responses of 20-year-olds or of 40-year-olds. In terms of economic attitudes, 40 is the new 20.

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## Results from the IEA's Forefront Market Research poll

As mentioned, it is hard to find surveys which explicitly investigate attitudes to socialism and capitalism from before 2016. The revival of socialism as a mainstream ideology, and a youth movement, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Before 2016, socialism was seen as a niche topic, and few pollsters bothered.

It is therefore not surprising that several gaps remain in the existing literature. Firstly, existing surveys are not specifically focused on the young, and some do not even provide a breakdown by age. They may note that the members of anti-capitalist 'tribes' are, on average, younger than the members of pro-capitalist or capitalism-agnostic tribes, or that X% of members of those tribes are under the age of Y. But this is still a very high level of aggregation.

Secondly, when surveys look for socialist attitudes, they usually concentrate on the old-fashioned subjects of industry nationalisations, regulation and price controls. That focus is not wrong. Whether you believe that larger companies should be privately or publicly owned, whether you believe that politics should interfere with business decisions or not, whether you believe that prices should be determined by market forces or by political decisions – those are the questions that separate capitalists from socialists. However, beyond that, there are also issues that are more specific to the current socialist revival and to the 'Generation Left' phenomenon, and this is not yet reflected in the polling. Most surveys still ask the sort of questions one could also have used in the 1980s.

To begin addressing these and other gaps, the IEA commissioned a survey from Forefront Market Research (FMR), which they carried out in February

and March 2021. FMR collected responses from just under 2,000 participants, all aged 16-34, from every region of the UK. Thus, the poll covers most of the Millennial generation, and about half of Generation Z. We classify those aged 16-22 as 'Zoomers' and those aged 23-34 as 'Millennials'.

The usual caveats apply. We have no guarantee that people always understand the questions in the way we want them to. We cannot be sure how sensitive the responses would have been to a change in the wording of the questions. We do not know by what reasoning people arrive at the answers they give, or what motivates them to answer in the way they do. This is a quantitative survey, not a focus group discussion. The author of this paper has never personally spoken to a single participant of this survey. But despite all that – this survey provides some new and original findings, and we are confident that our questions are reasonably clear, meaningful and unbiased.

### ***Definitions and positions***

We start our survey with some basic definitions. We first ask people which of the following two descriptions comes closest to their understanding of what 'free-market capitalism' means:

- 'An economic system whereby business, trade and industry is mostly run and owned privately for profit. Prices and wages are determined mainly by competition in a free market'.
- 'An economic system whereby business, trade and industry is mostly run and owned by the government. Prices and wages are determined mainly by the government'.

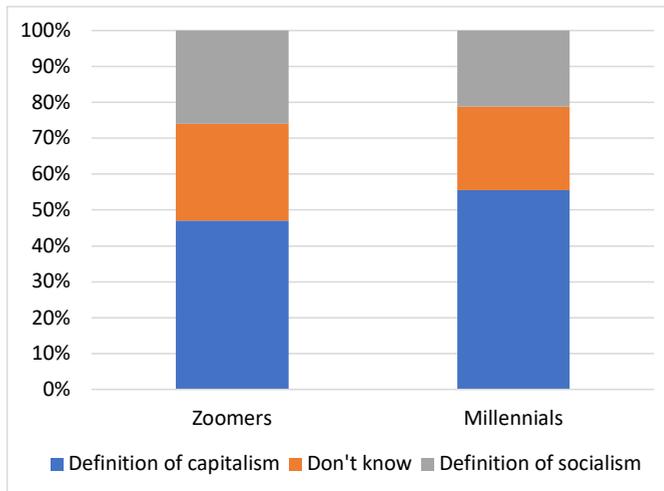
The first of these is, of course, a simplified version of the dictionary definition of capitalism, while the second is a simplified version of the dictionary definition of socialism. We then ask the same question about socialism, and present the exact same two response options again.

We do this for two reasons. We do not just want to know how many respondents know the correct answer; we also hope that if we provide those definitions early on, at least some respondents will carry on using them throughout the rest of the survey. If the terms 'capitalism' and 'socialism' mean completely different things to different respondents, they

are not really answering the same questions. This is a problem we cannot entirely avoid, but we can try to mitigate it in this way.

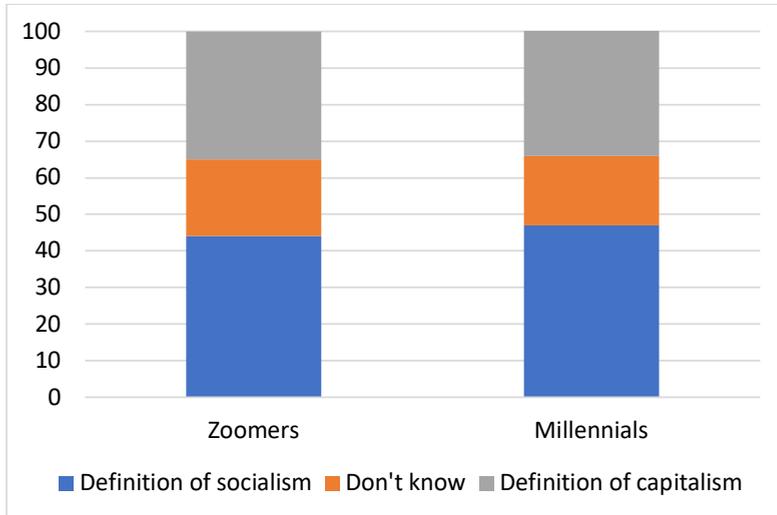
Just over half of Millennials, and just under half of Zoomers, correctly pick the definition of capitalism (see Figure 4). One in five Millennials, and one in four Zoomers, mistake the definition of socialism for the definition of capitalism. The remainder are not sure.

**Figure 4: Definition of free-market capitalism**



The results for socialism are similar. Just under half correctly pick the definition of socialism, but one in three mistake the definition of capitalism for the definition of socialism (see Figure 5).

We have generally not found a huge amount of variation by social class in our data, and where there has been some, it does not consistently point in one direction or the other. We will therefore not mention class very much in the remainder of this section. In the definitions, however, class does play a role. The majority of people in classes AB clearly know what the terms 'capitalism' and 'socialism' mean. In classes DE, only about two out of five people do, with the rest picking either the wrong answer, or 'Don't know'.

**Figure 5: Definition of socialism**

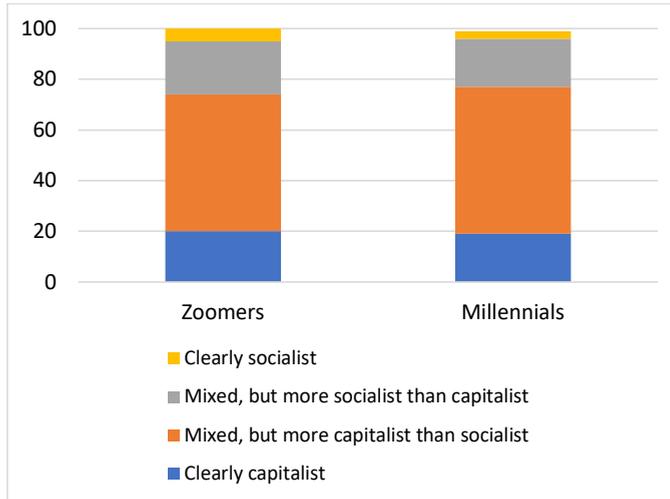
These results are, at first sight, not very encouraging. If only about half of respondents know the meaning of the terms 'capitalism' and 'socialism', how much does a survey about capitalism and socialism really tell us?

However, we should not read too much into those results either. We often use terms more or less correctly in practice, but would struggle when asked for the technically correct definition. There was a survey in Germany once, which appeared to show that an implausibly large number of people did not know the name of the Federal Chancellor. It later turned out that they knew that perfectly well. They were just confused by the use of the formal term 'Federal Chancellor' (*Bundeskanzler*), as opposed to the more familiar 'Chancellor' (*Kanzler*), i.e. they were wondering whether the 'Federal Chancellor' was somehow different from the 'normal' Chancellor.

Once we ask respondents to apply those terms, the results look very different. If large numbers of respondents really thought that capitalism meant socialism, and that socialism meant capitalism, then surely, many of them would think that the UK is currently a socialist country. But it turns out that virtually nobody thinks that. When asked to describe the current economic system of the UK in the light of their above answers, 96 per cent describe it as either capitalist, or as a mixed economy, with 77 per cent seeing it as mostly, or exclusively, on the capitalist side of that mix (see Figure 6). We need to bear in mind that in surveys, every response

option that *can* be chosen *will* be chosen by some, and normally by at least 4-5 per cent, a phenomenon known as the 'Lizardman's Constant'.<sup>28</sup> Thus, for all intents and purposes, 96 per cent means unanimity.

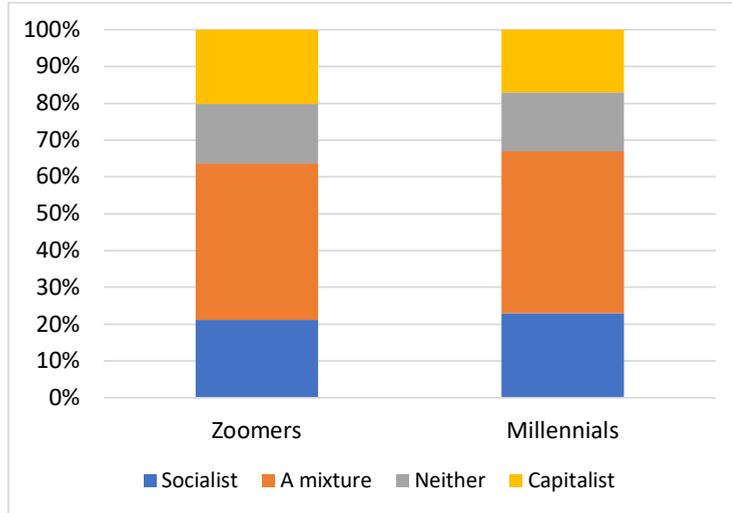
**Figure 6: Economic system of the UK**



We then ask respondents how they would describe their own economic views. 22 per cent describe themselves as socialists, a share which is slightly higher among Millennials than among Zoomers (see Figure 7). 18 per cent describe themselves as capitalists, a share which is slightly higher among Zoomers than among Millennials. 16 per cent pick neither. The most common response option is to support a mixture of the two.

<sup>28</sup> 'Lizardman's Constant is 4%', *Slate Star Codex*, 12 April 2013 (<https://slatestarcodex.com/2013/04/12/noisy-poll-results-and-reptilian-muslim-climatologists-from-mars/>).

**Figure 7: Generally speaking, how would you describe your own economic views?**



However, we know from previous surveys that even when most people have hugely positive associations with the term ‘socialism’, they nonetheless shy away from using that label as a self-descriptor. (We cannot tell whether this is specific to socialism, or whether it is a ‘commitment issue’ that applies to other -isms as well. There are simply not enough people who have positive associations with the term capitalism to check whether something similar is true on the capitalist side.)

We therefore also present a list of possible associations people may have with the terms ‘socialism’ and ‘capitalism’, and ask respondents to pick one or more for each category. We try to offer balanced lists which contain both positive and negative associations, to avoid nudging respondents in any particular direction.

We present the nine most common associations with both systems in Table 1. This is not because there is anything special about the number nine, but simply because if we compile separate lists for Zoomers and Millennials, the first nine items on the ‘Zoomer list’ also happen to be the first nine items on the ‘Millennial list’, if not in the exact same order. Zoomers and Millennials also coincide in their least common association with both.

Capitalism is most commonly associated with the rich, corporations, exploitation and unfairness, but also, to a lesser extent, with opportunity and success. It is also associated with the party currently in government, and the current Prime Minister. This is not, in itself, a positive or a negative association, but given what we know about the voting behaviour of people in this age group, we can assume that they do not see that association as positive. Somewhat unexpectedly, nearly one in five respondents also associate capitalism with high taxes. The last thing young people associate with capitalism is kindness, with a share barely above the Lizardman's Constant.

The most common associations with socialism are positive: it is associated with workers, people, equality, fairness, opportunity, and community. It is also still frequently associated with the previous leader of the opposition, and, possibly by extension, his political party. This is, again, not itself positive or negative, but given what we know about the voting behaviour of people in this age group, it is probably a positive association from their perspective.

The last thing that comes to young people's minds when they hear the word socialism is the erstwhile showcase of 'Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', held up by plenty of prominent Western socialists as a role model until 2013/14 (see Niemietz 2019: 232-247).

**Table 1: Most common and least common associations with capitalism and socialism (% Zoomers / % Millennials)**

	Capitalism	Socialism
<b>Most common associations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Rich (25%/24%)</li> <li>● Corporations (15%/22%)</li> <li>● Exploitative (19%/19%)</li> <li>● High tax (18%/19%)</li> <li>● Unfair (19%/18%)</li> <li>● Opportunity (16%/18%)</li> <li>● Tory (18%/17%)</li> <li>● Success (15%/15%)</li> <li>● Boris Johnson (17%/14%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Workers (20%/24%)</li> <li>● People (19%/23%)</li> <li>● Equal (21%/22%)</li> <li>● Public (19%/21%)</li> <li>● Fair (17%/19%)</li> <li>● Opportunity (16%/19%)</li> <li>● Communal (13%/16%)</li> <li>● Labour (15%/15%)</li> <li>● Jeremy Corbyn (16%/13%)</li> </ul>
<b>Least common association</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Kind (6%/6%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Venezuela (5%/4%)</li> </ul>

### ***Capitalism, socialism and environmentalism – Generation Greta?***

Millennial Socialism is a youth movement in its own right. But it is also a 'meta-movement', which quickly absorbs significant sections of other social movements and causes.

A clear example of this is environmentalism. Since 2018, we have seen the emergence of various overlapping new environmentalist movements, especially Extinction Rebellion (XR) and the youth movements around Greta Thunberg. Environmental problems such as climate change are not, in and of themselves, a socialism vs. capitalism issue. Environmental problems are common to *all* economic systems, be they capitalist, socialist, or whatever else, and *all* economic systems have to come to grips with them somehow. They are an unfortunate side effect of production, not a product of any one particular economic system.

Socialists, however, do not see it that way. They present environmental problems as specific to capitalism, and believe that the only way to truly solve them is to overcome capitalism itself.<sup>29</sup>

This view is not universally shared within the environmentalist movement, but it certainly fits in easily. In September 2020, Extinction Rebellion tweeted:

Just to be clear we are not a socialist movement. We do not trust any single ideology<sup>30</sup> [...]

[S]tating that we aren't a socialist movement is not the same as saying we reject socialism. From the offset [...] we have been an 'and' not an 'or' movement.<sup>31</sup> [...]

But for the avoidance of any doubt, we don't hate socialism, we hate the assertion that socialism is the sole silver bullet [...] Capitalism on the other hand can largely fuck right off. We're not idiots<sup>32</sup>

In other words, when XR say they are not a socialist movement, they do not mean this in the sense that they are open to market-based approaches. They mean this in the sense that they are open to, for example, 'Degrowth' ideas, which are anti-capitalist, but which are not, in the conventional sense, 'socialist'. XR may not be a socialist movement, but they are certainly an anti-capitalist movement, in which socialists are more than welcome.

How representative of the younger generations are movements like Extinction Rebellion? We asked respondents to what extent they agree or disagree with the following statement:

29 'The only way to halt climate change is to challenge the logic of capitalism', *New Statesman*, 5 April 2019 (<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/economy/2019/04/only-way-halt-climate-change-challenge-logic-capitalism>); 'Ending climate change requires the end of capitalism. Have we got the stomach for it?', *Guardian*, 18 March 2019 (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/18/ending-climate-change-end-capitalism>); 'The Rebel Alliance: Extinction Rebellion and a Green New Deal', podcast with Aaron Bastani, George Monbiot and Ann Pettifor, *Novara Media*, 23 April 2019 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sl-FbtHmZhU>).

30 <https://twitter.com/XRebellionUK/status/1300794775138906114>

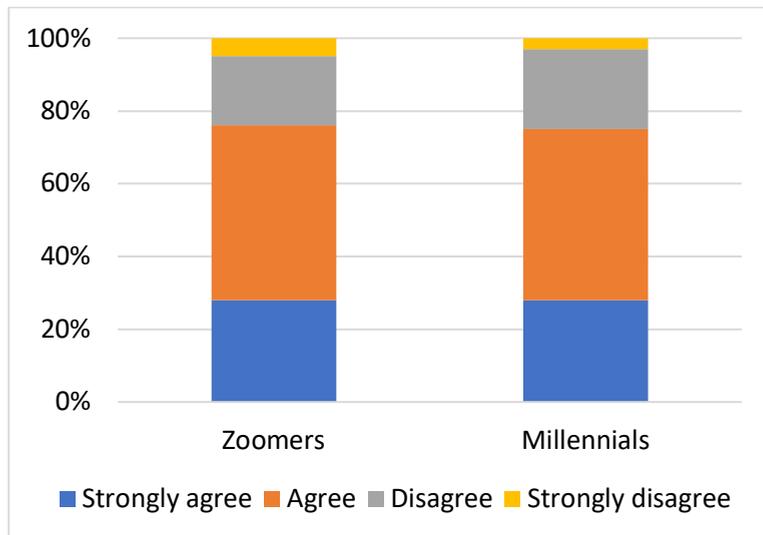
31 <https://twitter.com/XRebellionUK/status/1301516652811620355>

32 <https://twitter.com/XRebellionUK/status/1301516665327321092>

Climate change is caused by big corporations that pollute the atmosphere, because they care more about their profits than about the planet. Therefore, capitalism is the problem not the solution.

Three quarters of our respondents agree with this statement, a quarter of them strongly so, while virtually nobody (remembering the Lizardman's Constant) disagrees strongly. There are, again, no major differences between Millennials and Zoomers (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Climate change - capitalism is the problem**



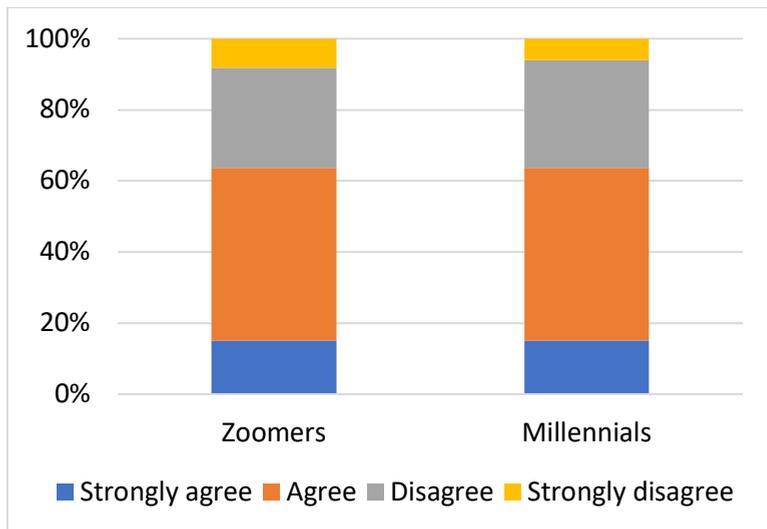
We initially wanted respondents to choose between pairs of conflicting statements on various issues. We then decided to present the two statements independently of each other instead, and ask respondents to what extent they agree with each. The reason is this: if we asked respondents to make an either-or choice between two statements, we would be imposing our own judgement that the two are indeed in conflict, and that it would be strange if somebody agreed with both. But maybe respondents do not see it that way. Maybe they do see the two statements as compatible, or maybe they think that both sound plausible.

This is indeed what happens here (as well as elsewhere in our survey). We also asked people whether they agree with the following statement:

Capitalism can help deal with climate change, because private businesses are motivated by the profits to be made from things like electric cars and renewable energy.

This is a heavily simplified version of the pro-market argument that while climate change represents a market failure, with the right incentives it can be overcome within a market setting. There is clearly some conflict between the former statement and this one, even if they are not exactly mutually exclusive. Still, it turns out that nearly two thirds of respondents agree with this statement, if not very strongly so (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Climate change: capitalism can be part of the solution**



We have no doubt that if we asked respondents to choose between the two statements, the 'socialist' option would win hands down. Still, one might have expected responses to the second statement to be a mirror image of the responses to the first one. They are clearly not.

### ***Capitalism, socialism and racism: Generation BLM?***

2020 could have been a single-issue year, in which Covid-19 crowded out everything else. But after the police killing of the black American George Floyd in May 2020, the issue of race suddenly took centre stage. Black Lives Matter (BLM) grew to the size of a mass movement with a huge media profile, as BLM protests erupted all over the country. What started as a debate about policing and the criminal justice system quickly became a much broader soul-searching exercise about the legacy of the British Empire, the merit of historical figures such as Winston Churchill, about statues and the names of buildings, about TV series using outdated language, about the curriculum, ‘unconscious bias’, ‘institutional racism’ and so on. Like environmentalism, these issues are not, in an obvious way, related to the economic system. Racism has existed in both capitalist and non-capitalist societies.

But, again, socialists do not see it that way. They see capitalism as an intrinsically racist system, and believe that the only way to truly overcome racism is to overcome capitalism itself.<sup>33</sup> Again, this view is not universally shared within the anti-racist movement, but it is certainly a major part of it. Black Lives Matter UK states: ‘[W]e are not a Marxist organisation. While some of the members of UKBLM are Marxists, not all members are. We are however, all anti-capitalists’.<sup>34</sup> And elsewhere: ‘We’re guided by a commitment to dismantle [...] capitalism’.<sup>35</sup>

So again, as with Extinction Rebellion, when BLM say they are not a Marxist organisation, they do not mean this in the sense that they are trying to build a coalition which might also include liberal anti-racists or conservative anti-racists. It only means that socialists of a non-Marxist variety, for example anarcho-communists, are just as welcome as Marxist socialists. It is therefore fair to describe BLM as a socialist organisation, even if some of them are not technically Marxists.

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33 See, for example: ‘Why anti-racism must be anti-capitalist’, *Tribune*, 23 January 2021 (<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2021/01/why-anti-racism-must-be-anti-capitalist/>); ‘Is capitalism racist?’, podcast with Laura Basi and Freddie Stuart, Open Democracy, 29 September 2020 (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/podcast-capitalism-racist/>).

34 Black Lives Matter UK: Frequently Asked Questions (n.d.) (<https://ukblm.org/faq/>).

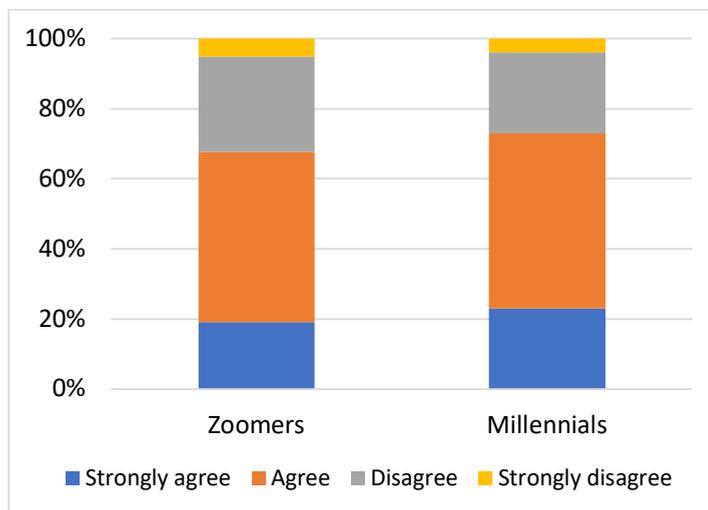
35 UKBLM Fund, ‘Who we are’ (n.d.) (<https://www.gofundme.com/f/ukblm-fund>).

Is BLM representative of the Millennial and the Zoomer generation? We ask respondents to what extent they agree with the following statement:

Capitalism is a system which pits individuals and communities against each other. It therefore heightens various forms of social tensions, including racial tensions.

It turns out that two out of three Zoomers, and three out of four Millennials, agree with this sentiment, and many of them strongly so. Virtually nobody disagrees strongly with this statement (see Figure 10).

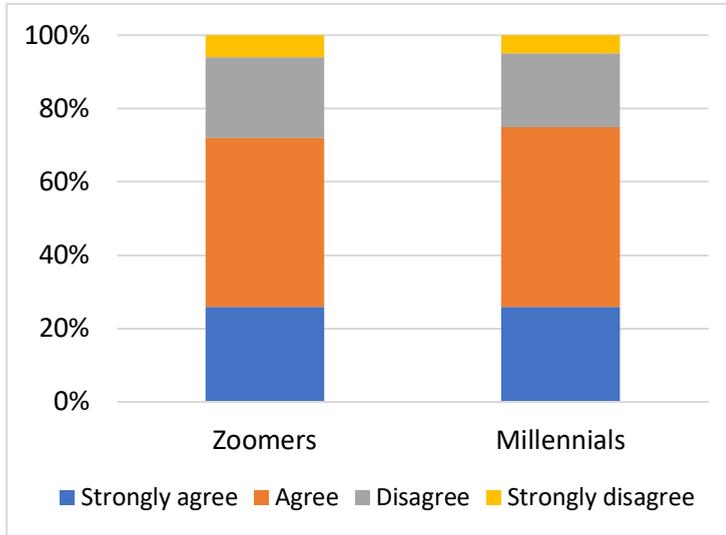
**Figure 10: Capitalism heightens racism**



As a control question, we also ask people to what extent they agree with the opposite statement, namely:

Racism has existed in all economic systems. There is no reason to believe that there would be any less racism under socialism.

Curiously, the results we get are almost identical (see Figure 11). This means that around half of our respondents must simultaneously agree with both statements.

**Figure 11: Racism is independent of the economic system**

If this had been a qualitative study, we would have followed up by highlighting the contrast and asking people how they can reconcile the two positions. Unfortunately, in this format, we cannot do that, and we do not want to engage in idle speculation about what might be going through people's minds as they answer the questions. The simple explanation would be that to someone who is familiar with anti-capitalist arguments, the statement that capitalism is racist will immediately sound appealing. But if that anti-capitalism really is mostly a gut feeling, rather than a deeply held conviction, the second statement may sound plausible, too.

### ***Capitalism, socialism and materialism***

One of the most persistent anti-capitalist prejudices is the idea that a capitalist economy promotes materialist values at the expense of other things. Supporters of the market economy, of course, do not see it that way. They believe that people are motivated by a mix of materialist and non-materialist aspirations, and that this is true regardless of the economic system they live in. They also believe that, to the extent that people are motivated by materialistic ambitions, a capitalist economy can channel those ambitions into socially useful avenues. The difference between East Germans and West Germans was not that the former were less materialistic than the latter; the difference was that an ambitious East German and an

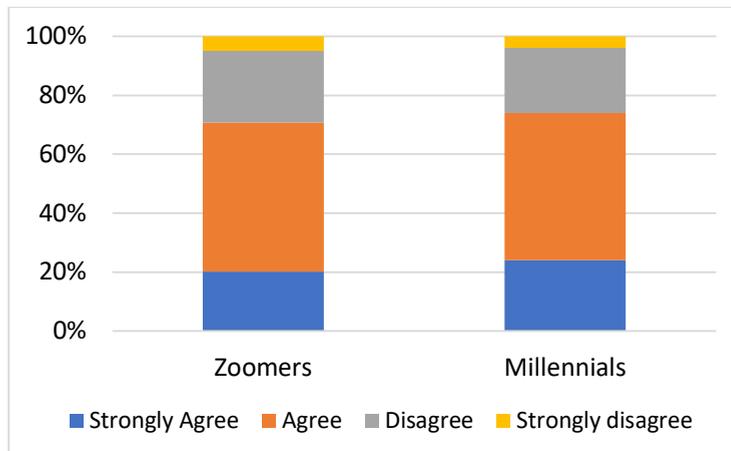
ambitious West German would have done different things in order to get ahead in life. An ambitious East German would have joined the Socialist Unity Party and, perhaps, reported on their neighbours, in order to obtain preferential access to consumer goods. An ambitious West German would have set up a business, or worked long hours, or obtained skills in high demand in order to get a well-paid job.

Where do young people stand on this divide? We asked respondents to what extent they agree with the following statement:

Capitalism encourages selfishness, greed, and materialism. A socialist system would encourage other values, such as solidarity, compassion and cooperation.

Three out of four respondents agree with this, one out of four strongly so. Millennials are slightly more likely to agree than Zoomers. Virtually nobody disagrees strongly (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Capitalism encourages greed and materialism; socialism encourages solidarity and compassion**

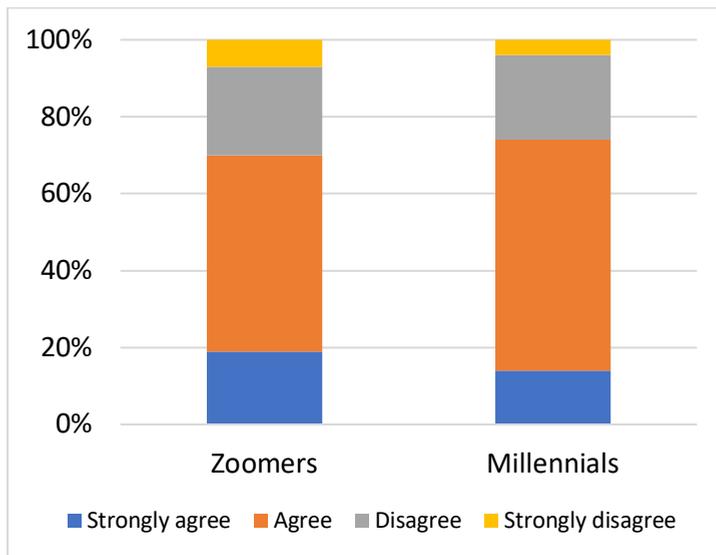


The pro-market argument cannot easily be compressed into a survey question, but we did ask respondents what they make of the following statement:

The profit motive is good for society, because profit-driven businesses create useful products and jobs, and generate taxes for public services.

Again, we get very similar levels of agreement, even if it is less strongly felt (see Figure 13). Around half of our respondents seem to agree with both statements simultaneously. In this case, it is perhaps less surprising, because while the statements differ in emphasis and implied value judgement, they are by no means mutually exclusive. Both can be true.

**Figure 13: Profit-driven businesses create useful products, jobs, and tax revenue**



### ***Capitalism, socialism and the housing crisis***

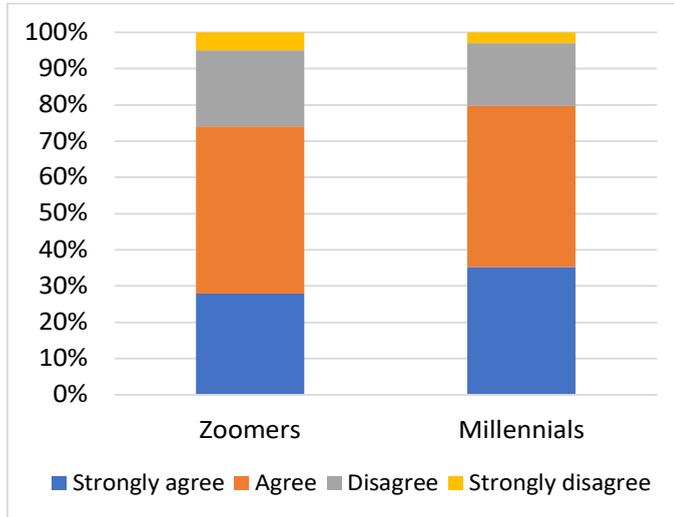
In terms of housing costs, the UK is one of the most expensive places in the world. This was not always so. Britain's house price explosion only really started in the mid-1990s, which is why its impact has been extremely asymmetrical. For those who bought their homes before that price explosion, or in its early stages, it meant ever-increasing asset values. But unless they inherited a house, very few Millennials, and not a single Zoomer, were in a position to benefit from this general trend.

Socialists see Britain's housing crisis as just another crisis of capitalism. Supporters of the market economy find that argument baffling. If 'capitalism' is to blame, why do we only see this problem in a small number of countries (or in the US, a small number of states)? And why is the problem so relatively recent?

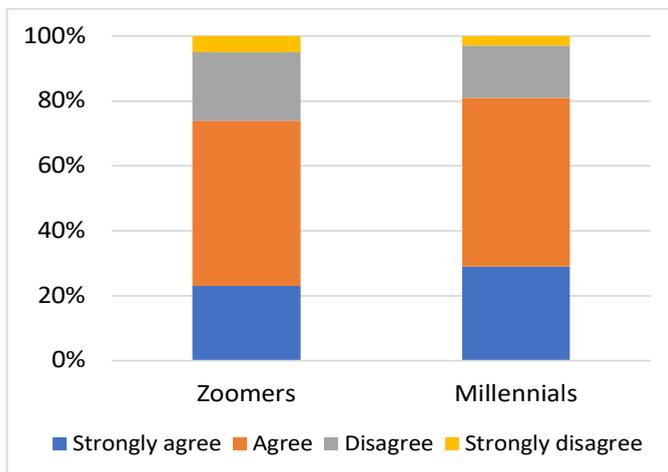
Where do young people stand on this issue, which affects them so disproportionately? We asked respondents to what extent they agree with the statement:

Housing is too expensive because private developers prefer to build luxury flats and large houses for wealthy people.

Just under four out of five people agree with that statement, with more than a quarter of Zoomers, and more than a third of Millennials, agreeing strongly (see Figure 14).

**Figure 14: Capitalism caused the housing crisis**

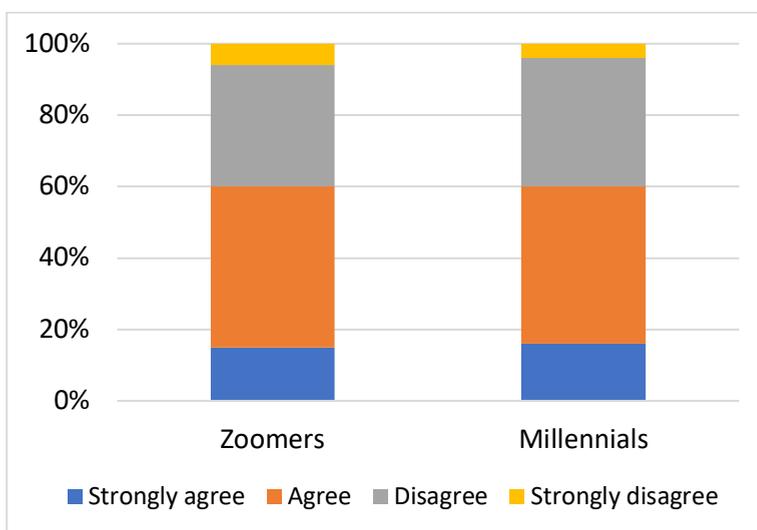
Given that diagnosis, it is not surprising that four in five respondents believe that 'We need a huge expansion in public housing and rent controls to fix the housing crisis', with 29 per cent of Millennials agreeing strongly with that statement (see Figure 15).

**Figure 15: We need public housing and rent controls**

The pro-market position is that we do not need any of that – we simply need to make it easier to build new housing. To check whether there is any support for that, we also asked people what they made of the statement ‘If we just build more housing all of types, the cost will come down’.

In hindsight, we probably should have made clearer that this is supposed to be an alternative to the former statement: never mind public housing, just build more housing across the board. In its current form, three out of five respondents agree with the statement (see Figure 16).

**Figure 16: If we built more housing, costs would come down**



Thus, young people are by no means hostile to supply-side arguments. But they do not elicit responses of comparable strength. If we asked respondents to choose between the ‘socialist’ option focused on public housing and rent controls, and the ‘capitalist’ option of supply-side liberalisation, there can be no doubt that the socialist option would win hands-down.

### **Healthcare**

Britain has an unusual healthcare system. Most developed countries secure universal access within mixed systems, that is, a mix of both public

and private provision, alongside a mix both public and private financing. Britain maintains a comprehensive national health service based on state financing and state provision.

Britain also has an unusually strong emotional attachment to its healthcare system. In surveys about the popularity of various British institutions (broadly defined), the NHS always easily tops everything else. With near-unanimous and strongly felt public support, the NHS is the most secure institution in the country – more secure, in its existence, than the United Kingdom within its current borders itself.

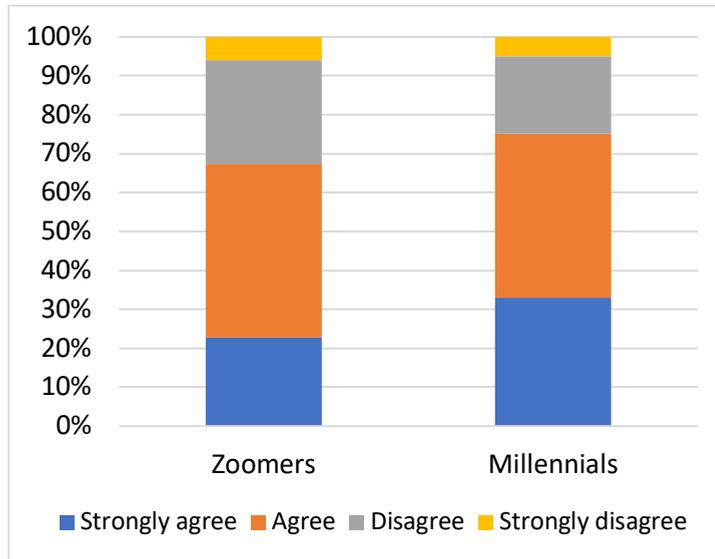
Socialists, however, do not see it that way. In their perception, the NHS is perpetually under threat, and never more than a few years away from covert privatisation. Every time a private company is awarded a contract for some relatively minor procedure (a completely normal occurrence in other health systems), it triggers hysterical responses from the *Guardian*, the *Independent* etc. about sinister conspiracies to destroy the NHS.

Do young people share this mindset? We asked respondents whether they agree with the following statement:

The NHS – and free healthcare for all – would be put at risk with private sector involvement or market competition.

Two out of three Zoomers, and three out of four Millennials, agree with this statement, with one in four Zoomers, and one in three Millennials, agreeing strongly. Virtually nobody disagrees strongly (see Figure 17).

**Figure 17: Private sector involvement would put the NHS at risk**

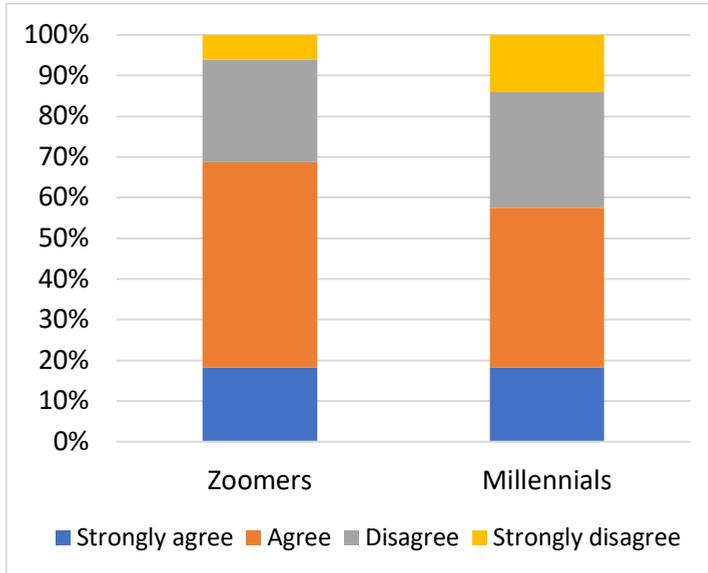


We also asked respondents what they made of the counterstatement, namely:

We have nothing to fear from private sector involvement in healthcare, as long as the government makes sure that it is accessible to everybody.

Among Zoomers, we get similar levels of agreement for both of these conflicting statements. Among Millennials, there is net agreement for both, but support for the 'socialist' statement is higher, and more strongly felt (see Figure 18).

**Figure 18: We have nothing to fear from private sector involvement in healthcare, as long as it is accessible to everybody**



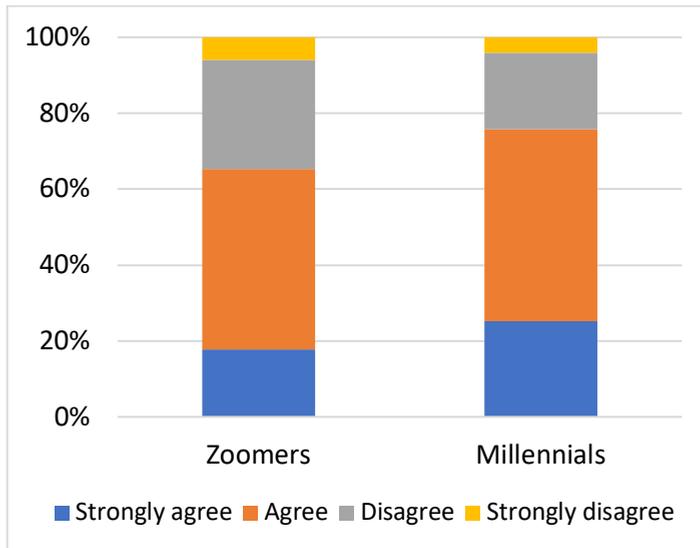
Once again, we get very high levels of agreement with a socialist position, but we also get the impression that this conviction cannot be all that deeply held, given how many people also readily agree with the opposite statement. This does not mean that young people will just say ‘agree’ to anything that sounds sufficiently plausible: among Millennials, there clearly is a difference in degree. If they had to choose between the ‘socialist’ and the ‘capitalist’ statement, it is safe to say that the socialist one would win, and probably with a very comfortable margin. But it does suggest that at least in part, the high level of agreement with the socialist statement simply reflects familiarity.

### ***Nationalisation of industries***

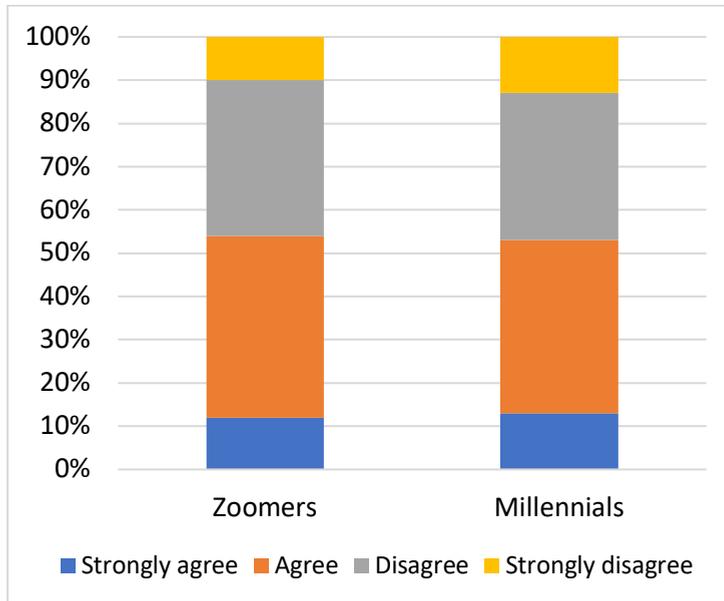
Attitudes to industry nationalisations are already well-documented: there have been plenty of surveys on this subject and they consistently show that when asked to choose between private and public ownership, most people prefer the latter. We cannot add much to that, but we cannot leave the issue either, given that public ownership is at the heart of socialism.

Two thirds of Zoomers, and three quarters of Millennials, agree that sectors such as energy, water and the railways should be renationalised, with a quarter of Millennials agreeing strongly, and hardly anyone disagreeing strongly (see Figure 19).

**Figure 19: Utilities and railways should be renationalised**



However, a slim majority of both Zoomers and Millennials also agree with the counterstatement, which is that 'the Government should privatise public services where possible because businesses can run them better'. Thus, at least a quarter of Millennials must be simultaneously in favour of privatisation and nationalisation (see Figure 20).

**Figure 20: Public services should be privatised**

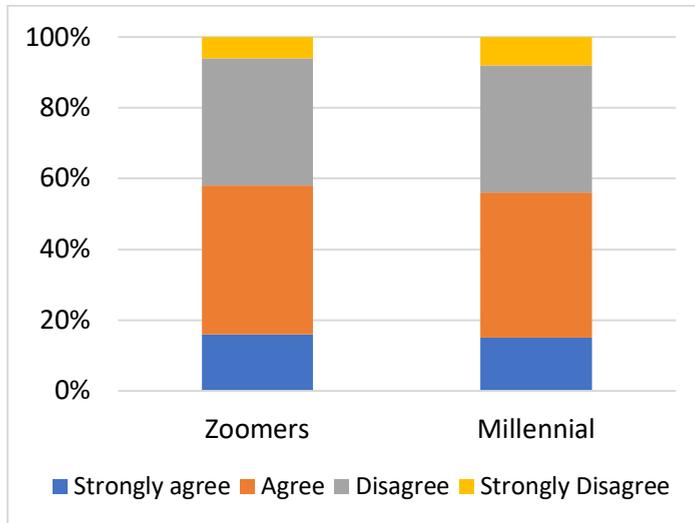
Again, it seems that 'Generation Left' is mostly 'Generation Familiar With Left-Wing Arguments'.

### ***Public spending***

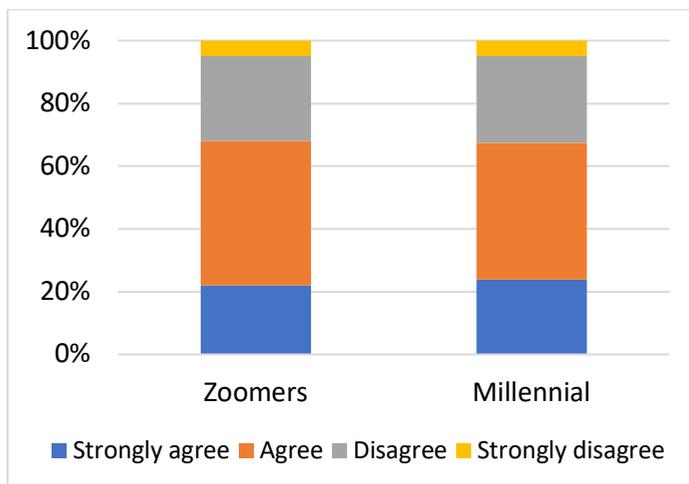
Being in favour of a high level of public spending does not, on its own, make someone a socialist. That is still within the boundaries of conventional social democracy, which, while certainly far from ideal from a liberal perspective, is still compatible with a market economy.

The point where it starts to morphs into socialism is where people refuse to even consider resource constraints and trade-offs, and treat public spending as merely a matter of political will. It is where taxes are no longer seen as a necessary evil to pay for public services, but as an entirely unproblematic way of confiscating ill-gotten gains.

Where do young people stand on the issue of taxation and public spending? On the one hand, there is majority support for the statement 'I would prefer to pay more tax, so we have better funded public services and benefits' (see Figure 21).

**Figure 21: More tax to pay for public services and benefits**

But at the same time, there is even greater support for the statement 'I would prefer to pay less tax, because I don't trust the government to spend my taxes wisely' (see Figure 22).

**Figure 22: Less tax, because the government will not spend it wisely**

This is a common type of inconsistency, which we often see in polling data. People often express very negative views of politicians (one of the most unpopular professions in the country), but then also advocate all sorts of policies that would expand the power of the state, and thus, of those very same politicians.

***Socialism: never 'really' been tried?***

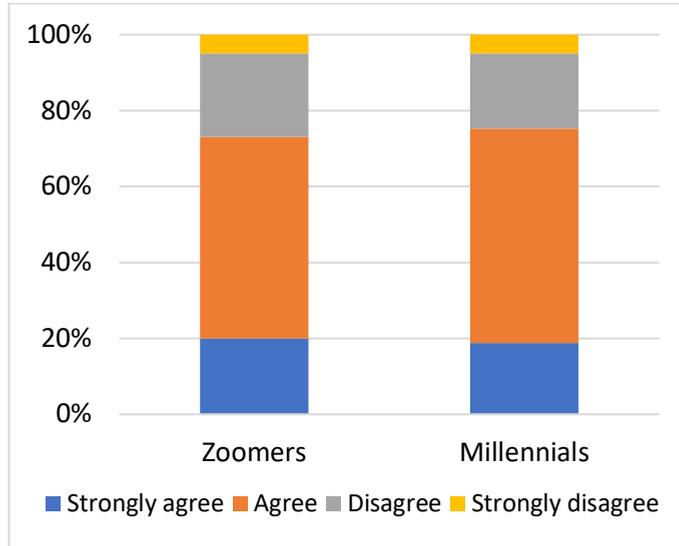
In debating the relative merits of socialism and capitalism, supporters of the market economy tend to argue empirically. There have been many different attempts to set up socialist societies, and they have all ended in varying degrees of failure.

Socialists do not accept that argument. They claim that none of the systems that *called* themselves 'socialist' really *were* socialist, and that socialism, as originally intended, cannot have failed, because it has simply never been tried (Niemietz 2019). Which side of that divide are young people on? We ask respondents what they make of the following statement:

Socialism is a good idea, but it has failed in the past because it has been badly done (for example in Venezuela).

Three out of four respondents agree with that statement, with one in five agreeing strongly. Virtually nobody disagrees strongly. There is, again, not much difference between Zoomers and Millennials (see Figure 23).

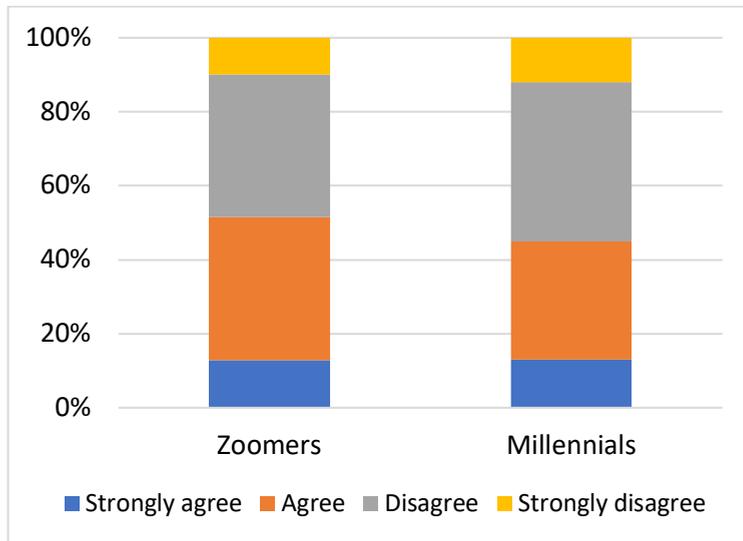
**Figure 23: Socialism has failed in the past (e.g. in Venezuela) because it has been badly done**



We also ask the counter-statement, namely:

Socialism has repeatedly failed because it's a bad idea and should never be tried again.

53 per cent of respondents disagree with that statement, with just over one in ten disagreeing strongly. Millennials are more likely to disagree than Zoomers (see Figure 24).

**Figure 24: Socialism is a bad idea and should never be tried again**

To supporters of the market economy, the claim that '*real* socialism has never been tried' may sound like a lazy excuse and an overused cliché. But it is also the mainstream opinion among younger people.

## Conclusion

Britain is not on the brink of a socialist revolution. The rhetoric about 'Generation Left' implies a consistency, a coherence, and a degree of commitment to socialist ideas, which most people in this age group do not have. The reality is more chaotic. We have repeatedly found the following pattern in our survey: when presented with an anti-capitalist statement, a large majority of young people – usually around three quarters – agree with it, and many of them – usually around a quarter or a third – strongly so. But when this is immediately followed up with a diametrically opposed pro-capitalist statement, we also often find majorities agreeing with the latter.

There are differences in degree. We often find overwhelming majorities supporting the anti-capitalist statement and much smaller majorities supporting the pro-capitalist statement. Support for the anti-capitalist statement is often strongly felt, support for the pro-capitalist argument rarely is. But the fact remains that large numbers of people – often around a quarter of respondents – simultaneously agree with an anti-capitalist and a pro-capitalist statement on the same issue.

This suggests that while socialist ideas may be widespread, they are also thinly spread. They are not necessarily deeply held convictions. They seem more like readily available default opinions, which young people adopt, because they sound familiar and intuitively appealing.

Nonetheless, the 'Generation Left' narrative contains a lot of truth. Default opinions matter. Whether somebody believes X from the bottom of their heart, and is not prepared to re-evaluate the case for X in the slightest, or whether they believe X tentatively, because the pro-X argument is the one they are most familiar with – either way, that person believes X. Whether somebody can give a fully worked out, perfectly coherent defence

of X, or whether their grasp of X is tenuous, and their support for it riddled with contradictions – either way, that person believes X.

The ‘Generation Left’ narrative may contain a hefty dose of wishful thinking (it is usually used by people who approve of the phenomenon). But it is nonetheless a lot closer to the truth than the coping mechanisms that supporters of the market economy have adopted in response.

Millennial Socialism is not simply a repetition of the student radicalism of 1968. Young anti-capitalists are not ‘just going through a phase’ and they will not ‘grow out of it’. Several surveys show that there is not much difference between the typical attitudes of people in their late teens and people in their early 40s. In our own survey, we have found either no detectable difference between Millennials and Zoomers, or we have found that Millennials are *more* socialist in their attitude than Zoomers. It seems far more likely that non-socialist Zoomers will ‘grow into it’ than Millennial socialists will ‘grow out of it’. If these trends continue, then in the future these will become the mainstream views of the population as a whole. ‘Generation Left’ will become ‘Population Left’.

Nor can we brush the phenomenon aside as ‘just a social media bubble’ or ‘just an online echo chamber’. We cannot give an estimate of the proportion of Millennials and Zoomers who are committed socialists, because the numbers vary from survey to survey, and they also depend on what precisely we mean by that. But it is definitely wrong to think of Millennial socialists as weird outliers who have nothing in common with ‘normal’ members of their generation.

It makes much more sense to think of politically active young socialists as akin to Instagram influencers. Influencers are always ‘unrepresentative’ in the sense that most of us are not nearly as up to speed on fashion (or whatever their area of influence) and not remotely as interested in it as they are. Influencers are also ‘unrepresentative’ in the sense that they dedicate a large proportion of their lives to something that most of us only have a superficial interest in. But that does not mean that they are ‘just a bubble’ whose activities have no impact on ‘real people’. It does not mean that they are not influential – they by definition are.

When ‘normal’ people adopt fashion choices they picked up from influencers, they necessarily do so in less coherent ways. They may pick items endorsed by influencers, but they may then also combine them with an item that an

influencer would consider terribly unfashionable, without noticing their 'faux pas'. When asked why they made the choices they made, they could not articulate their reasons in the way an influencer could. But at the end of the day, the choices made by trendsetters and early adopters 'trickle down' and eventually become the norm.

The same thing happens in the area of ideas, and that is the way we should think about Millennial socialist activists: as trendsetters and early adopters. Asking whether or not they are 'representative' is the wrong question. Is the 'typical' Millennial well-versed in Marxist theory and do they spend a lot of time arguing about socialist politics? Obviously not. But do they know someone who does, or follow someone on social media who does? Probably, yes. Do they pick up some of those ideas, even if in a less coherent, less well-articulated way, and even if they are not nearly as interested in those ideas and not nearly as committed to them? Apparently so. That is the way Millennial socialism has become the norm.

This paper has its limitations. We cannot say much about *why* young people have started to pick up socialist ideas, as opposed to, for example, libertarian, conservative or social democratic ideas. We cannot say much about what supporters of capitalism should do in response.

What we can say for now is that they need to stop burying their heads in the sand. They need to stop looking for excuses to pretend that Millennial socialism is not happening. Millennial socialism is real and it is happening. That is neither a reason to panic, nor is it a reason to despair and throw in the towel. But it is a reason for acknowledging the existence of the phenomenon, to accept the challenge, and to act accordingly. Hopefully, this paper will act as a wake-up call.

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