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UDC 130.2

### **THE IDEOLOGIZATION OF THE MILLENNIAL DREAM IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL CHALLENGES**

This work connects two explanations of the notion of millennial dream: one based on Paul Smith's thoughts in *Millennial Dreams – Contemporary Culture and Capital in the North* from 1997 which are placed in juxtaposition with the views of Gregg Hemmings offered in his documentary film *The Millennial Dream* from 2016. The argument states that American self-definition has undergone a notable change at the contemporary level of globalization and the notion of local has gained on importance and transformed into a political catchword. Politicizing of culture has long been reflected in the documentary film genre and the present analysis aims at demonstrating how political indoctrination reshapes documentary films. Global challenges before and after the turn of the century placed the USA in a novel position in which the pressure of strengthening global competition in a seemingly unilateral world has mixed with conflicting ideologies which have been competing for the right to (re-)define postmillennial Americanness.

A second objective is to demonstrate that cultural discourse has shifted towards a more left-wing-type interpretation of American identity as *laissez-faire* capitalism have been struggling with providing comparable life-chances for the Y and Z generations of Americans with the consequence that these cohorts have serious problems in maintaining life standards comparable with the standard of living of their parents and grandparents. The argument states that the transformation of the American dream into a Millennial dream is one effort to maintain continuity of American cultural evolution. Recent political conflict, the result of which is a greatly divided America writhing between antithetical interpretations of reality, is just one symptom of redefining Americanness for and by the millennials.

**Keywords:** American dream, millennial dream, documentary film, leftism, globalization, local

#### **Introduction**

The 'annus mirabilis' 1989 marked the end of the old bipolar world which placed the United States of America in the position of a heavy-weight boxer who knocked out his opponent and won the world championship but was not prepared to continue life outside the ring. The forty-four years of deadly

competition and rivalry between the two dominant superpowers was over and the USA entered an era in which muscle became less of an advantage. The two prosperous periods of the Clinton administration, between 1993 and 2001, characterized by intense economic growth, expansion of digitalization, and success in international trade and politics was a new American golden age. Its momentum persisted and its energy was not broken even by the tragical 9/11 events in 2001 which provoked the US War on Terror. Only the 2008 economic crisis, which significantly contributed not only to the election of the Obama administration but also to the deepening of the divide within the fabric of the American society, brought the turning point in that American success series. The crisis shed light on the fragility of the American economic system and magnified the problems that were caused by excessive and uncontrolled risk-taking strategies of many globally influential financial institutions [1]. This experience, in combination with the latent social tensions that have long characterized the American society, lead to the strengthening of social friction along racial lines, deepening of class divide, and growing skepticism in the vigor capitalism. For the first time in modern American history, younger generations of Americans were confronted with the reality that hard work and college education do not necessarily ensure prosperity and success. A college degree is not an automatic entrance to good jobs and access to upper middle-class life standard anymore, and social mobility is greatly inhibited in the postmillennial USA. Disappointment and bitterness of the Y generation (those borne between 1981 and 1996) led to radicalization of views and to further polarization of the American society. The original American dream evaporated in the heat of the cruel financial and economic reality of the end of the first decade of the 2000s and mixed with threats at a global scale such as climate change, worldwide migration, globalizing terrorism, and the recent pandemic. These external pressures have contributed to the radicalization of the American society and the divide culminated in the 2020 presidential elections which showed the world a completely different United States of America than many would have ever expected. It would be a broad simplification and generalization, however, if this divide were accounted as the failure of the Trump administration and related to the frustration generated by the financial instability caused by the pandemic. Below the surface of everyday partisanship and political struggle, stronger streams of social change can be identified which stretch beyond the boundaries of pure economic performance of one or another American administration. In fact, even critics of the Trump administration admit that the economic performance of the USA under President Trump was at least comparable with the levels reached in the Obama era [2]. What are then the causes of the great tension that is observable in the United States of America and how do these problems appear in the documentary genre?

## **Analysis of the Documentary Film**

“Documentaries have always held the power to influence public opinion, and historians and critics of documentary have always emphasized its social and political functions,” [3; P. 2] The second decade of the 21st century magnified this influence and documentary films have gained on power. Production of feature-length documentary films proliferated and local and national television networks, together with YouTube, the dominant American video-sharing platform, offer plenty of documentaries for their audience. The documentary genre also offers a qualitative shift in informing and influencing public opinion by taking advantage of the fact that new generations of audience are extremely susceptible to visual culture. For the millennials, Internet is a natural environment and a place for self-expression. According to Kapoor and Solomon, “They [the millennials] embrace technology because they were brought up around it, and as a result, are very comfortable with change” [4; P. 310]. This generation is present in the real physical and in the virtual online worlds simultaneously, where communication takes place via different platforms used for exchanging text and video messages and sharing thoughts and photos. Contradictory to this deep integration with electronic facilities that serve speedy communication, some studies [5] show that the millennials lack effective communication skills and lay behind the previous generations in their problem-solving skills. Millennials are a digital generation who, on the other hand, have problems to place themselves and define their existence in the physical world. This uncertainty is strengthened by the quantity of information by which this age cohort is constantly bombarded. They see the global challenges as their own personal struggles and feel personal responsibility for grand issues the solution of which exceed the possibilities of an individual. On this account, the generation of millennials may fall victims of ideologies that promise solutions for the global challenges and are susceptible to radicalization. The Millennial Dream [6] features this vulnerable generation and their struggles to define themselves in the postmodern world putting the notion of the American dream [7] in juxtaposition with the relatively newly coined notion of Millennial dream. The film addresses the problem from six different angles that all correlate with the central question how the millennial generation will be able to find their place in the postmillennial America. The authors analyze the millennial generation in relation to their possibilities on the job market which is closely intertwined with their choices in education. Further aspects investigated by the filmmakers were the millennial views about doing business fairly and with great respect and sensitive approach towards the natural environment which is demonstrated by the examples of B-corps. The filmmakers finally highlight the importance of communities and personal connections for the millennial generation by demonstrating changes in choices for housing and the

return of millennials to the city centers. The production company – Hemminghouse – decided to depict the millennials as a generation which is very active in searching answers for the challenges of the age and the final product conveys a very positive message about this generation which, however, is not free from ideological bias.

### **Ideological bias in the film**

In a certain sense, Hemmings' documentary can be categorized as an 'anti-establishment' documentary film [3; P. 7]. Though the creators do not document strikes or show the everyday struggles of the working class, the film is openly critical towards the essential American myth – the American dream – which, in this film, is portrayed as the ultimate symbol of laissez-fair capitalism. Explicit criticism of the American political elite or government is not discoverable, but the film's message openly questions the values of capitalism which produced the American suburbs and regarded consumption and accumulation of material wealth as a well-deserved fruit of hard work and sacrifice – basically as a protestant virtue [8]. However, this lifestyle is portrayed by the filmmakers as obsolete. Similarity with Paul Smith's thoughts when he describes the so called discontented contended is remarkable. According to Smith, "The nation is steadily proletarianizing all form of work, and has put into action a process of forcible downward spiraling: once the "middle class" occupations which depend upon knowledge, skills and service become the pre-eminent site for the extraction of surplus value, other labor such as manufacturing is squeezed downwards, devalued even to the point that it almost disappears or is replaced by work that pays a below-minimum wage" [9; P. 221]. The disappearance of job possibilities which offered decent life standards for the workers who found well-paid positions in great numbers in the manufacturing facilities of the USA, primarily in car industry, in combination with the 2008 financial crisis, which ate up the savings and investments of millions of Americans hit the foundations of the American society. Many young people, who grew up in those working-class families and became first-generation college students, did not wish to follow the career paths of their parents but used their college degree and searched for better-paying, higher prestige corporate jobs. With the 2008 crisis, this possibility of upward social mobility dramatically narrowed down, and only a minority of fresh graduates were not able to find remunerating corporate job positions. The direct consequence was their disability of paying back student loans accumulated during the college years. This situation was in dramatic contrast with the promise of the American dream. Seth Godin author, speaker, and entrepreneur describes this in the documentary film the following way: "The American Dream is based on possibility and dignity. The possibility part is that you could come from someplace else and if you just showed up, did what you were told, did it with earnest-

ness, did it with consistency, you would get ahead, and your kids would get even further ahead. And what that promised ... was the dignity that came from being respected in your community because we decided not to measure who your parents were, not to measure so much what you looked like, but to measure how much you got paid; and so, there was this path from where you were to where you wanted to be. That was the promise” [6; 2:21-3:00 min.]. This possibility ceased to exist after 2008 and the millennial generation had to adjust to the new reality which was symbolized by the saddening fact that sixty per cent of college graduates worked in jobs that did not require college degree in the time of the production of the documentary film. With losing the possibility to achieve at least comparable social status as their parents, the young millennials lost the dignity element of the American dream too. Thus, the millennial dream – as depicted in the documentary – is a concept that is coined out of necessity and simultaneously marks the end of a great era and the beginning of a new period which is characterized by insecurity, lack of confidence, doubt, and anxiety.

The producers of the *Millennial Dream* make an effort to collect positive examples, successful initiatives, and good practices of new entrepreneurs, but an interesting controversy runs through the whole film. Notably, entrepreneurship, initiative, and individual risk taking are portrayed as new and desired values, however exactly these virtues constitute the basis of the sharply criticized capitalism. A similar ideological dualism is manifested in the interviews in Chapter 1, titled as *Jobs*. The narrative suggests that the millennial generation is much more interested in meaningful jobs. Whereas a job is portrayed as meaningful when it has a broader social impact or significance and is not exclusively about making money. The film offers the view of Paul Macmillan, National Strategy and Operations Consulting Leader at Deloitte Canada, who refers to a Deloitte research in which this tendency was discovered. As Macmillan underlines, “I would not want to suggest that..., that does not mean that people aren’t interested in, you know, getting ahead or progressing, or improving their living standard, but for sure this feeling of an ability or desire to contribute more broadly to society beyond the paycheck is absolutely real” [6; 8:26-43min]. It is further suggested that the millennial generation searches primarily for more fulfillment from the job they do, and the example of Jenifer Starr is used to illustrate how a once corporate employee left her work – having worked eleven years in Human Resources, in outsourcing services industry – for a non-profit organization called *Free the Children* as director of partnerships. In her words, meaningful job practically means a lot of travelling or meeting talented youth, which is better than earning money. This explanation however does not seem to be real evidence, since Ms. Starr, regardless of her new job position, can rather be considered an example of a successful corporate employee, who materially seems to be satis-

fied and thus her preference naturally shifts towards other values than pure financial remuneration. She is not the prototype of the fresh graduate who needs to make ends meet. This assumption is further supported by the statement of Ryan Porter CEO & Co-founder of Raise Your Flag, a startup that helps youth find work. “The very first thing that I find,” he says “and from our experience with the young people, that they are feeling is they feel like they failed the system. And then we also have these people that go through university or college, come out the other end without guaranteed work or without a prospect of work and so what they start to do is say ‘Well, if I can be broke doing this job, I might as well be broke doing a job that I love or that has purpose’. And the way that everybody else interprets that Millennials care about jobs with purpose. Maybe, some of them do, but some of them need to pay the cellphone bill last month; and they are just looking for a job to do that” [6; 10:29-11:00min]. Thus, the message of the filmmakers is rather unclear as in their effort of creating a positive narrative that would support the axiom that millennials would rather choose socially significant jobs in non-profits to well-paid corporate positions, they actually seem to disprove their statement. The argument is not persuasive, and the presented examples are not consistent with the argument of the filmmakers. Making a better society is a diligent goal worth working for, but it is hard to believe that this would be a primary motivation for a generation of graduates who is burdened with record student debt.

The filmmakers concentrate on the changing role of education in the second chapter of the documentary film by contrasting the contemporary supposed role and goal of education: providing subject content and simultaneously develop personal skills – understood primarily as problem-solving skills – with the goal of education in the immediate post-World War II times: providing basic universal education. The former, again, presented as part of the so-called millennial dream while the second is portrayed as part of the obsolete American. The message, however, is not as confident and persuasive as probably the filmmakers intended it to be. What the viewer is offered is some short insight into schoolwork where a science teacher is working with children in a rather traditional school setting while speaking about the importance of task-based learning. Though the spectator is offered some short scenes depicting an ingenious student who has designed a cheap arm prosthesis made of three-D printed spare parts and guitar strings, the overall message becomes rather obscure and disappointing when we learn from the educators that the future is unpredictable, and the teachers actually do not know how to prepare the students for their future jobs. It is maybe because many future jobs do not even exist yet and many jobs that seem to be high-paying positions nowadays might also disappear in the near future. The overall impression is not a millennial dream but rather a millennial nightmare of helplessness. Teachers, in reality, do not know what to prepare their

students for and their only advice is that students must take responsibility for their education. This advice, however, is rather an excuse and not a qualified answer that might be expected in a documentary film. Without serious analysis and expert advice, the message sounds rather ridiculous than professional.

The third area that should supposedly define the millennial dream is business – new economy companies. The producers reemphasize that the manufacturing sector that once used to be the engine of the American dream has gone offshore as multinational corporations outsourced their production facilities to cheap third world countries leaving American workers at the mercy of fate. Postmodern society is dominated by the services industry and manufacturing together with agriculture constitute a less significant portion of economy that contributes to the production of wealth. This partly correlates with the statement offered by the voice over stating that “Success in the new economy is less about the type of product or service being offered and more about why companies are in business in the first place. And even the giants of the past are re-examining the social and environmental impact of their operations” [6; 19:33-19min]. The environmental and fair-trade arguments are also put in juxtaposition with the concept of the American dream that is symbolized with shots about crowded chicken farms, dried out soil, heavy-industrial facilities that resemble oil refinery, or factories releasing clouds of smoke and steam in the air associating capitalism with environmental damage. This impression is supported by Seth Godin’s explanation stating that “We are now in this post-industrial era where one of the jobs is clean up some of what the industrial era left behind in its rush to be cheap. And number two is to figure out how to create meaning in what people do. Because we are not able to buy as much stuff either because we’ve bought it already, we do not have a place to put it, or we are out of money [6; 19:50-20:10min]. The filmmakers suggest that the new economic model – which is not laissez-fair capitalism – will be based on companies for which making money and generating profit is not the only goal but is equally important as taking care of the planet and the people. The benefit corporation (B-Corp) is offered as the alternative to the traditional C-Corp. A sort of ethical behavior is assumed from B-Corps and as Steve Beaudesne, Co-Founder and CEO of Beau’s All Natural Brewing Company suggests “Companies that do the right thing for the right reason tend to outperform everyone else” [6; 23:45-49min]. The right thing and the right reasons are defined in the context of environmentalism and social care. It may be true that the American society has arrived in the post-industrial era at the price of outsourcing, i. e. moving their heavily polluting production facilities and large quantities of trash and debris to less developed countries. but it is definitely NOT true that the American society would ever be

willing to give up the benefits and comfort that corporate capitalism made accessible. The right thing seems to be rather expensive and utopic.

The Communities chapter is organically interconnected with the last, Personal Connections, chapter depicting the same phenomenon from two different points of view. While the first one suggests a renaissance of the American downtown the last chapter proposes that it is happening parallel with the re-creation of micro and macro communities in those re-vitalized downtowns. The American suburb is portrayed as an anomaly and indeed it can be accepted as one if we do not take into account its original promises: safety, family-centered communities, piety, social status and comfort which could not be found and associated with the American downtown. Not accidentally did the suburb grow into an anomaly, since in a society which enables more and more people to become wealthier – even if only at the price of loans – it is evident that more and more people will demand access to the promises of consume. Of course, personal property is a burden and in an era in which access to personal property becomes less available an argument that highlights this downside is more than welcome. This argumentation, however, assumes that a condo in the downtown can be a comparable alternative to a large family house in the suburb in a society where size does matter. Yes, as a temporary solution for a single, young person with no children whose priority is building a career and personal success, this type of living offers a lot of advantages, but can it be a preferred type of living for a family of five or six? Harold Madi, Director of Urban Design in the City Planning Division in the City of Toronto suggest that we are witnessing a return to a norm, in which neighborhoods within which schools, facilities, and services coexist in organic units in which most of them are at easy reach in a walking distance stating that “We have come three-sixty. In many ways there is a rejection of our parents’ sense of success and a, kind of, return back to, kind of, more traditional ways of living in the city” [6; 28:16-29min]. Is it however a valid replacement of the sense of success, which is manifested in private property, ownership, social status, and material well-being? The statement resembles the revolution of the flower people of the 1960s who consciously rejected the traditional values of the American society to cherish a utopia and who, by the 1980s, became owners in the American suburbs themselves. The same thought is echoed by Brandon G. Donnelly, Real Estate Developer, City Builder, and Blogger who adds that “People value experiences over material things. There is a mindset that I’d like to go and shut my door and go travel for... for a month if I want to and not worry about maintenance and... and looking after my property and all those types of things. So, there is a freedom element” [6; 29:57-30:11min]. Thus, the same old concept is now called the millennial dream not Bohemianism or the hippie movement. It did not come to existence due to a deliberate choice but simply out of necessity – the inaccessibility of the American dream. The millennial

dream is, however, supposed to be based on conscious choices and should not spring from compulsion. The just beginning, fresh graduates who are trying to find their place in the highly competitive society can hardly be expected to make conscious choices. Their acts are going to be determined by the circumstances and the accessibility of opportunities. Conscious choices in purchasing quality and products that have been produced in a fair and environmentally friendly way can be expected only from those millennials who will have the means to choose. Yes, “Now, North American consumers are increasingly concerned about quality and the social impact of their shopping choices. More people want to know about the background to products on the shelf. There is a growing desire for a personal connection to the products and services we use” [6; 31:55-32:10min], but only if they are able to earn the amount of money that allows these choices. Otherwise, the millennial dream remains a dream.

The hidden leftist political underpin becomes strikingly open at the end of the documentary film. The politically colored catchwords of the producers, such as make a difference in the world, it is going to be driven by the students, by the citizens, do things for the right reason, vital cities, vibrant regions, and communities appear in combination with visuals which resemble the propaganda products of socialist realism once so well-known by the Central and Eastern Europeans. It is stunning how these propaganda elements return in a not even greatly modified version. The predicting of a distant future which is symbolized by colorful umbrellas that underline diversity, a young father who is trying to teach her daughter how to ride her bike in a public park (not in his private driveway), the serving of supposedly vegan food in combination with statements like the one read by Alex Vietinghoff, the voice over of the film, “The hope will lie in making substantive changes in these critical areas, and what may help most is that these values are at the core of what makes us human” [6] make it absolutely clear that the primary intention of the film is to urge the millennials to re-define the core values of the American society. The portrayal of the LGBTQ flag in combination with a scene from BLM protests evoke revolutionary feelings in the viewer. The only perceivable difference between these pictures and the photographs depicting communist rallies in the 1960s is the replacement of the once red flag decorated with a sickle and hammer symbol with the colors of rainbow or the faces of the factory workers demanding better job conditions supplanted by the vision of BLM protesters. These symbols of a socialist revolution are re-emphasized by the words of Seth Goldin which, in their essence, are a call for political activism: “If somebody is curious, is editing Wikipedia, is blogging on a regular basis, is organizing meetups in their town, is figuring out how to weave together a fabric of community where money isn’t the

point, the more we see that, the more we're moving in the right direction" [6; 38:10-28min]. The vision of the young Muslim lady standing in burka following his words re-emphasizes the global validity of Goldin's statement. The message is clear: change must take place not only in the USA, but at a global scale. The millennial dream is the continuation of the centuries-long utopia building, which refuses competition and capitalism and in which family is replaced by community. The final compilation of activist statements clearly confirms the ideological bias: "The American dream is the hidden path to unhappiness. Always learning about money, money, money, money, money, money. Part of the millennial dream is to make an impact to make positive change. Having to do something that you enjoy is much more satisfying. We want to do what we love and we want to invest in our community. We all do find truthfulness through helping others."

### **Conclusion**

Gregg Hemmings' documentary film, *The Millennial Dream*, is indeed an anti-establishment film if we define the American establishment as a conglomerate and association of multinational corporate business entities and elite politicians. The film re-emphasizes the frustration of the millennial generation which, after the apparent failure of capitalism being able to ensure continuous and uninterrupted social development and upward social mobility, is gravitated towards socialism. This is not a new tendency in the American academic discourse. Paul Smith, the author of the volume *The Millennial Dream* [9], underlines that the idea of democratic socialism has been present in the American academic discourse for decades citing William Appleman Williams. In his book, *The Contours of American History*, Williams argues that "Americans would one day prove mature and courageous enough to ... undertake the creation of a socialist commonwealth. ... They [the Americans] have the chance to create the first truly democratic socialism in the world" [10; P. 488]. Paul Smith, president of the Marxist Literary Group from 1988-1997 [11], also underlines that this American flirting with the possibility of creating a democratic socialist commonwealth is real. Smith's strong criticism of capitalism is evident when he argues that "Indeed, the ideologues of capitalism occasionally went so far as to claim that it was indeed capitalism that we had to thank for this brave new world. The prospect, it was said, of unfettered global competition, completely deregulated and free markets, and ever more mobile capital had been so tempting that the entire world – even the former communist world and what remained of actually existing socialism – had persuaded itself of the benevolence and benefits of capitalism" [9]. Smith also underlines the obsolescence of the concept of nation state and national conservatism. There is evident parallel between Hemmings' film and Smith's book both presenting arguments that the millennial dream in the con-

temporary discourse is actually a synonym for democratic socialism and it can be a valid alternative to laissez-fair capitalism for America. This debate is the real division line in the contemporary American society as a large number of Americans still maintain the idea that capitalism is vigorous and is able to renew itself. Consequently, the original American dream is still valid, and socialism is not an acceptable alternative to it. On the other hand, representatives of the progressive left-wing maintain that democratic socialism is the only valid choice for the millennials. Hemmings' film summarizes the arguments used by the latter group and resonates to the suggestions formulated by Smith two decades earlier.

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