

# **From Generation X to Generation A: Selected Novels of Douglas Coupland**

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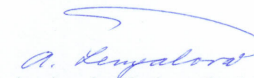
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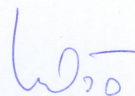
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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato práce analyzuje zobrazení americké konzumní společnosti v románech Douglase Couplanda *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), *Microserfs* (1995) a *Generation A* (2009). Práce se zabývá problematikou dvou generací a rozdíly mezi nimi, dále hledá alternativy jako nosné téma Couplandových románů. Práce dochází k závěru, že obě generace se od sebe nijak výrazně neliší a mladí dospělí se potýkají se stejnými problémy.

Klíčová slova: Douglas Coupland, Generace X, Generace A, Microserfs, marketing, konzumní společnost, Amerika, informační technologie, mladí dospělí

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyses the portrayal of the American consumer society in Douglas Coupland's novels *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), *Microserfs* (1995) and *Generation A* (2009). It also deals with the problems of two generations and the differences between them, it further looks for alternatives as a main theme of Coupland's novels. The thesis concludes that the generations do not differ too much and young adults stand up to the same problems.

Keywords: Douglas Coupland, Generation X, Generace A, Microserfs, marketing, consumer society, America, information technologies, young adults

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## INTRODUCTION

The Canadian writer Douglas Coupland, born in Germany, is famous for his satirical fiction that belongs to contemporary culture. He is also recognized for his visual art and design. His first book was published in 1991. Coupland's novels and non-fiction books were translated into more than 30 languages around the world.<sup>1</sup> In his work he deals mainly with "twentysomethings"<sup>2</sup> and his stories are considered to be critical of that time.

Despite being Canadian, Coupland's work is usually about American young adults and their lifestyle. His first novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), which dealt with twentysomethings, characters representing the new generation in a "state of anomie,"<sup>3</sup> rejecting the consumerism and society of that time, being part of so called "culture of semi-disposable Swedish furniture, fast food and designer labels."<sup>4</sup> Richard Gray remarks that Coupland "is acknowledging, however wryly or bleakly, his implication in a culture where, as the narrator of *Generation X* puts it, 'genuine capital H history' has ended, 'turned into a press release, a marketing strategy'."<sup>5</sup> Richard Gray wanted to point out the problems of our characters that they actually have no existence. They are constantly living in the presence of mass media. So they have quit their careers in order to row against the stream. Working at "McJob,"<sup>6</sup> drinking heavily they are telling stories. Another novel by Coupland is *Microserfs* from 1995 which could almost be the flipside to the *Generation X*. *Microserfs* deals with a group of geeks who give up on "having a life" to work. This is totally opposite to what members of Generation X, simply "GenXers"<sup>7</sup> have done they gave up work to "have a life." It is obvious that *Microserfs* is much more positive and its characters full of energy.

Up to now the latest work by Douglas Coupland is *Generation A* (2009), which is more than similar to *Generation X*, using the same style and structure which is also a framed narrative. Taking place in a near future, we read short stories from five different

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<sup>1</sup> See Douglas Coupland, "Biography," <http://www.coupland.com/category/bio/>

<sup>2</sup> Vann Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon* (New York: Orion Books, 1996), 174.

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 758.

<sup>4</sup> See Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 758.

<sup>5</sup> See Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 758.

<sup>6</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 110.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Rushkoff, *GenX Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 4.

individuals, who were brought to a same place, after they were stung by a bee, who were thought to be extinct.

The purpose of this thesis is to illustrate the generations, their problems and look for some alternatives as a main theme according to the novels. It also seems that Douglas Coupland was ahead of the game when he predicted some future events.

## 1 WHAT DEFINES A GENERATION

It is suspicious to give some “generational labels”<sup>8</sup> to certain population during the certain period of time. The fact is that people born a few decades ago had different values, different expectations. They did things which might look ridiculous for contemporary society. That is for sure a part of human nature. But who comes up with those labels, that we can talk about “Generation This and That?”<sup>9</sup> Obviously, it is historians and sociologist, who give those labels. While speaking about groups of people in history, they need these labels to identify them, give them some kind of identity. All this is quite understandable. When we talk about Generation X we talk about people born between 1961–1981.<sup>10</sup> But how can we talk about the same people when someone is born before the War in Vietnam and someone after? Actually, they did not grow up in the same world. According to Strauss and Howe the authors of the book called *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?*, to talk about a particular generation we have to understand that it takes around eighteen to twenty-four years, average is twenty-one years. This is what defines a generation’s time span, time which is needed for that generation to reproduce and get the next generation started.<sup>11</sup> Still, this is not the answer. Another important feature defining the generations is characterized by the “peer personality”<sup>12</sup> theory. We might say it is connected with huge historical events. People in each generation share something common, to talk about their experiences or the way they looked at different aspects of life,<sup>13</sup> we have to understand that “Baby Boomers”<sup>14</sup> (the generation that preceded Generation X) might understand for example the Vietnam War from a different perspective, put it into a different context. William Strauss and Neil Howe interpret the peer personality as the main feature that defines the generations.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> See Howe, Neil, and Bill Strauss. *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 13.

<sup>11</sup> See Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> See Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> See Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 41.

## 2 BOOMERS VS BUSTERS

To start talking about Generation X, we must understand what in fact preceded this particular generation. It was a generation called Baby Boomers. “Those 78 million Americans born between 1943 and 1960.”<sup>16</sup> Generation known for “questioning and challenging the establishment.”<sup>17</sup> It was the generation of huge expectations, anything was possible for them. And you have to give them that right to think of themselves like they did. After overcoming the Great Depression and winning the Second World War, the United States together with Russia became the world leading powers with bright future for its coming generations. We might even talk about the American Dream again, which was uneasy to reach during those difficult times in American history. It was Boomers who started to think about this phenomenon again. “Everyone imagined that they could get the standard package for the American Dream: B.A. degree, good job, nice houses, and family.”<sup>18</sup> But this myth stayed elusive for most of the 78 million Americans which belong to this group of people.

Generation X means a lot of things. It could refer to the name of Billy Idol’s band. But we face a generation characterized by the lack of specific identity, consuming society. Term itself was popularized by Douglas Coupland.<sup>19</sup> Generation X – “eighty million young men and women, they make up the biggest generation in American history.”<sup>20</sup> Like the previous generations they also faced economic, political and ecological environment, representing a wide variety of lifestyles and beliefs. The generation which is not afraid of the digital future. Nintendo, Atari, Cable TV, all this was already present and not unknown for these people. It may surprise some people that they were considered as “too cynical, lazy and always seeking fun,”<sup>21</sup> it seems like they did not take their lives seriously. Sometimes you may find definition like: “segment of America’s youth too young to remember the assassination of President Kennedy and too old to have missed the end of disco.”<sup>22</sup> They witnessed their parents’ hippie riotous life and their later transformation to

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<sup>16</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 73.

<sup>19</sup> See Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> Howe, Neil, and Strauss, *13th Gen*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Rushkoff, *GenX Reader*, 3.

“Yuppies.”<sup>23</sup> “Running on financial credit and social debit,”<sup>24</sup> they had the feeling that after the boomer population they are going to struggle, having in mind that the Medicare and the Social Security depend on them it was their burden, the burden of so called “baby busters.”<sup>25</sup> The generation that is unlikely to match their parents’ fortunes.<sup>26</sup>

Sociologists rather prefer the term “thirteenth generation,”<sup>27</sup> the generation characteristic for lack of motivation, no career goals, no political ideology, no family values. Twentysomethings are dependant on their parents’ money, as they are not willing to work at McJobs for the rest of their lives. In addition to this, boomers were getting older looking forward to their social benefits which as it appears will depend on those young adults, spending their time in a mall, eating in McDonalds and permanently watching MTV. The reason why sociologists call these eighty millions Americans the 13th generation is maybe due to the fact that it stands for something negative, it is something people can argue about. The number thirteen might evoke something bad, everybody knows about Friday the Thirteenth, number considered as unlucky. There are much more elucidations about this term. “It’s the floor where elevators do not stop, the doughnut bakers do not bother to count. Counting back to the peers of Benjamin Franklin, this generation is, in point of fact, the thirteenth to know the American nation, flag, and Constitution.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 188.

<sup>24</sup> Rushkoff, *GenX Reader*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon* 12.

<sup>26</sup> Rushkoff, *GenX Reader*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Rushkoff, *GenX Reader*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Howe, Neil, and Strauss, *13th Gen*, 16.

### 3 GENERATION X

The main characters of Coupland's first novel are Dag, Claire and Andy. They are part of the society they hate. Educated but underemployed, they face the consumerist society. Instead of trying harder in their lives, they somehow lose hope, unable to cope with the situation. *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* is the story of three disaffected children of the eighties who cannot live up to conventional society's expectations.<sup>29</sup>

Working at low-paying, unpopular McJobs, the term invented by Douglas Coupland, is no real fun for young adults of these time. Disgusted with their jobs they simply do not want to work for companies operating in service sector, providing services. McJob is defined as "a low pay, low prestige, low dignity, low benefit, no-future job in the service sector."<sup>30</sup> It is no surprise that these "slackers"<sup>31</sup> rebel against the Puritan/Protestant work ethic, the pride of the United States of America. As described in *Generation X Field Guide and Lexicon*, a slacker is "a rebel against the Puritan work ethic. A generic term for one who does not attempt to live up to society's expectations."<sup>32</sup> With a lack of motivation, they just lay back and wait for "it" to happen to them. With the idea that they have to "live and work at McJob wages to pay Social Security"<sup>33</sup> for Boomers, it would be difficult for everyone, it is definitely not an easy task.

They meet in California desert, living next to each other in their small bungalows they are part of "the poverty jet set."<sup>34</sup> The term described as "a group of people given to chronic traveling at the expenses of long-term job stability or a permanent residence."<sup>35</sup> They work at McJob positions; Dag and Andy together as bartenders in a local pub and Claire works as a cashier for the Chanel. Everything looks appalling for them and as they think of their lives they "wonder that all things seem to be from hell these days: dates, jobs, parties, weather..."<sup>36</sup> So there they are, in California desert, namely in Palm Spring, and as Andy says one cold night sitting on a terrace: "We know that this is why the three of us left our lives behind us and came to the desert – to tell stories and to make our own lives

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<sup>29</sup> See Jason Cohen and Michael Krugman, *Generation Ecch!: The Backlash Starts Here* (New York: Fireside, 1994), 112.

<sup>30</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 110.

<sup>31</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 150.

<sup>32</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 150.

<sup>33</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 111.

<sup>34</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (London: Abacus, 1996), 5.

<sup>35</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 7.

worthwhile tales in the process.”<sup>37</sup> They tell those “bedtime stories”<sup>38</sup> to each other unable to criticize at the end because this is the only way they feel safe, having problems to reveal their emotions. It seems that these problems result from “the absence of mother love which turns out to be the root cause of their troubles.”<sup>39</sup>

The escape from home is a big issue of these days. The problem is that they are running away, but the reason is not to stand on their own feet, it is more likely an escape from “unbearable situation at home”<sup>40</sup> Not everyone comes from a wealthy family and has no problems with their parents. Almost every teenager goes through this stage, when they do not agree with their parents no matter what. Some of their runaways might have been inspired by Huckleberry Finn “who took off and paddled his way down the Mississippi, along the way growing from a boy into a man and learning how to love and respect others who might be different.”<sup>41</sup> Maybe they are looking for a frontier, the truth is that mobility is very important for American society, it is one of the key features of their identity. They move a lot, usually because of a better job, elders move to some sunny places like Florida, just to spend the rest of their life with sun and nice weather.

In the novel Andy leaves his home as a teenager at quite an early age to face the real world. As he remembers: “I, in fact, have no memory of having once been hugged by a parental unit.”<sup>42</sup> The lack of love shown by his family might have resulted in a fact that he has never been in love. Obsessed by his skinny body he is coming from a big family and very good during his studies of languages, when his specialty is Japanese, he leaves his family to try to live on his own, to look for love of his life.<sup>43</sup> As Andy says in one of the chapters: “I’ve never been in love, and that’s a problem. I just seem to end up as friends with everyone, and I tell you, I really hate it. I want to fall in love. Or at least I think I do. I’m not sure. It looks so ... messy.”<sup>44</sup> Claire has a different story. One day she meets Andy

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<sup>36</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Cohen and Krugman, *Generation Ecch!*, 113.

<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey T. Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle: The Why Behind “Generation X”* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995), 92.

<sup>41</sup> Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 92.

<sup>42</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 155.

<sup>43</sup> See Coupland, *Generation X*, 53.

<sup>44</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 53.

in Palm Springs while he is “tending the poolside bar at La Spa de Luxembourg.”<sup>45</sup> She is on a vacation with her family and Andy sees Claire sitting “profoundly unamused by her family’s spirited, italicized conversations.”<sup>46</sup> She is totally fed up with her family. She needs a serious conversation so she goes to the bar, where Andy is working that day and the pair starts chatting. She tells him how disappointed she is, feeling that she is different from other members of her family. As the conversation passes they feel friendliness, more than that, but nothing happens. Andy asks her if she would not like to move to the bungalow next to him and later she agrees. Both of them want something different than they are offered till this moment.<sup>47</sup> They want to live on their own, unhappy with their lives so far. The last character on the scene is Dag. Working in Toronto and having a job in advertising he refuses to work in those “veal-fattening pens”<sup>48</sup> and moves to California desert to work at McJob with Andy.

There they are, all of them living in Palm Springs together, ready to fight against all the traps the life brings. The biggest problem for the characters is that “they don’t believe in the American dream now.”<sup>49</sup> Their anger is aimed at their parents as Dag vandalizes a car with a “bumper sticker saying WE’RE SPENDING OUR CHILDREN’S INHERITANCE.”<sup>50</sup> They do not see any future, prosperity. “The only reason they’ve dropped out from society is that the market is down.”<sup>51</sup> Day by day working at McJobs for eight hours of monotonous work they come home with the feeling of “the endless stress of pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause.”<sup>52</sup> It was their choice to live on the margins as Dag describes the reason why he quit the job he had in Toronto. “I wasn’t going to produce much, and to be honest, I had decided that morning that it was very hard to see myself doing the same job two years down the road.”<sup>53</sup> It is understandable that people want to improve, challenge themselves, but to quit a job when they are doing well does not make much sense. As said before at the centre of attention for those three twentysomethings are older people, previous generation and mainly yuppies, “young urban

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<sup>45</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 37.

<sup>46</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 38.

<sup>47</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Cohen and Krugman, *Generation Ecch!*, 113.

<sup>50</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Cohen and Krugman, *Generation Ecch!*, 113.

<sup>52</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 14.



professionals with a taste for BMWs, Rolex watches, imported bottled water and fashionable restaurants.”<sup>54</sup> They are still reminded by older generation of their failure. That nothing is good enough for them. “I just don’t understand you young people. No workplace is ever okay enough. And you mope and complain about how uncreative your jobs are and how you’re getting nowhere, and so when we finally give you a promotion you leave and go pick grapes in Queensland or some other such nonsense,”<sup>55</sup> as the boss of Dag comments on his decision to quit the job. It seems that GenXers have the chance to live much better lives than they were living, it is only up to them. But for some reason they do not want to. Of course they want but they do not want to go for it when they have a chance, as teenagers they were used to have what they asked for and now they think that it will come by itself without hard work, the problem is that it does not work like that in life. People have to try hard until they achieve something. They are annoyed and fed up with the society and their own situation, but instead of working harder they turn their anger towards other people, as Dag accuses one of the richer guys in the novel saying: “You’d last about ten minutes if you were my age these days.”<sup>56</sup>

The main word which characterizes the Generation X is probably “decline and end.”<sup>57</sup> As we may witness this bad turn in their social life we may also see the problems in economy which might have much bigger impact on their future, not only theirs, but also future of their offspring. On every step, every corner, they can hear things like the end of progress, the end of equality. Beside this, even the end of the Cold War had a “bittersweet tinge.”<sup>58</sup> Of course, it was a great success thanks to a bad political situation which led to a collapse of the Soviet Union and as a result the United States of America became the absolute world leading power. But it was not that positive as they might have thought, “because for the life of us, no one in America today can get a handle on the big question, ‘What next?’”<sup>59</sup> “The twenties are supposed to be a time of widening horizons, of bright possibilities. Instead, America seems to have entered an era of limits – or at least convinced

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<sup>53</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 23.

<sup>54</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 188.

<sup>55</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 25.

<sup>56</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 26.

<sup>57</sup> Eric Lui, “The End of Progress?” in *GenX Reader*, ed. Douglas Rushkoff (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 73.

<sup>58</sup> Eric Lui, “The End of Progress?” 73.

<sup>59</sup> Eric Lui, “The End of Progress?” 73.

itself of that.”<sup>60</sup> It is obvious that finding a job is an uneasy problem to be solved. One might disagree that the job opportunities are still up for grabs, that is true, but more or less it is one of those unpopular McJobs. But it is not the end of the American Dream. It looks like the capitalism is over, the system which made its name during the times of the Industrial Revolution. We have to understand that progress is almost like a synonym to the United States.

America as we know it exists only a few centuries, less than any other European country and still they have a rich history. The progress made from sixteenth century up to now, to be one of the world leading powers, is simply admirable. Back to the point, it was not the end of the American Dream, as it is something what will never die, it was important, still is and probably always will be. It is up to this generation to get back on track, get back to the materialistic American life. But the truth is that they face economic crisis. “No generation should be asked to suffer the burden of the excesses of another.”<sup>61</sup> From the statement made by former President Bill Clinton we may see that Generation X actually is supposed to suffer the burden:

... Years of neglect have left America’s economy suffering from stagnant growth and declining incomes ... They have left a mountain of debt and a Federal Government that must borrow to pay more than a fifth of its current bills. Perhaps most sadly, they have left the great majority of people no longer dreaming about the American Dream. Our children’s generation may be the first to do worse than their parents.<sup>62</sup>

Economy of the United States is the engine that drives American life, but with no engine a society cannot progress. Furthermore, America is running out of gas.<sup>63</sup> Two-thirds of new jobs created in 1992 are actually McJobs with hourly wages and no benefits. As a result, people live almost in poverty. But what is more deterrent is the fact that minimum wage has 26 percent less purchasing power than two decades back. In a simplified way, people are working harder but are paid less. There was also a massive firing in the 1980s, around twenty million workers lost their job just because employees went out of business or they were simply fired.<sup>64</sup> America’s economy of that time was in trouble, not a big one, but sooner the Americans realize the problem, the better for them. Workforce was

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<sup>60</sup> Eric Lui, “The End of Progress?” 73.

<sup>61</sup> Rushkoff, *GenX Reader*, 77.

<sup>62</sup> Rushkoff, *GenX Reader*, 77.

<sup>63</sup> Rushkoff, *GenX Reader*, 77.

<sup>64</sup> Rushkoff, *GenX Reader*, 78.

underproductive and children undereducated. The times of conspicuous consumption has to stop. The solution is in long-term investments in people, education and health care. This will bring the return on investment. Society simply cannot consume more than it produce. Not for the whole time.

The problem with Social Security system has to be also mentioned. Problem of this system is that it is unfair to “younger, less affluent and less numerous workers to support an older, more affluent and larger segment of the population.”<sup>65</sup> Generation X has absolute right to complain about this fact, by the time they will need the money, it will not be available for them, “even the Social Security Administration says it may be broke by the year 2020, and definitely by 2029,”<sup>66</sup> there will not be much to pass around for slackers. “Another study conducted in 1994 for the youth political advocacy group revealed that more twentysomethings believed in UFOs than the idea that Social Security money will be intact when they retire.”<sup>67</sup> The Social Security money will be available, but for boomers, not for Generation X. Reason why it is like this is more than obvious:

Slackers pay a much larger portion of their paychecks toward Social Security than Boomers, but they are the ones who are getting to use the hard-earned cash slackers are giving up. It is pretty discouraging for a GenXer who earns \$9 an hour (less than \$20,000 a year, before deductions) to realize that he or she is helping fund the Social Security and Medicare of a retired couple who earn \$50,000 a year and own a house with no mortgage.<sup>68</sup>

The national debt of 1990s was a remarkable amount of money with the growing tendency, which is not taken seriously and will be constantly overlooked, this “budget deficits will have a huge impact on your economic future – how much people will pay in taxes, the chances of getting a good job, owning their own home, or receiving good health care.”<sup>69</sup>

For over two hundred years America was doing just fine, in terms of national economy, operating with their budget very carefully, in a responsible way, having deficits only in times of a war or a great depression, all this has come to an end in 1969, since then the curve of debt was raising and raising. A debt means a lot of interest payments, money

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<sup>65</sup> Rushkoff, *GenX Reader*, 81.

<sup>66</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 185.

<sup>67</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 163.

<sup>68</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 187.

<sup>69</sup> Rushkoff, *GenX Reader*, 83.

which could be spent in a much better way for more useful things like investments to health care, environmental issues or education.<sup>70</sup>

I would like to concentrate now on American education and its problems. From surveys made in the 1990s we know that almost no one under thirty ever reads a newspaper or watches the news. Someone might argue that Generation X is lazy. But there has to be something young people care about. Maybe it is a problem of news, which, sometimes use the information in its own way, sometimes it distracts people. Not every time the information used is relevant, working as a tool of politicians in their campaigns for example.<sup>71</sup> Among another explanation we might include problems with education on which I would like to focus now a little bit. It is definitely schools that should prepare children for their future. Due to its changes in school curriculum, changes in school structure and general attitude of society “National Commission on Excellence in Education”<sup>72</sup> released a report saying that “for the first time in the history of the United States, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents.”<sup>73</sup>

“Public education in America has long been considered ‘the great equalizer,’ providing a level playing field for each child and enabling anyone, from the poorest to the most wealthy, an opportunity to realize his potential. To this generation, however, it has functioned in the role of ‘the great polarizer’.”<sup>74</sup> The system which was based on its availability for almost everyone turned to something opposite. It was no longer considered to be the great equalizer, it became the polarizer and the term itself says what students and their parents had to face. System based on money and inequality. The problem was that students who wanted a good education had to pay. This is not a problem as it is the way it works in many modern countries. It is rather problem if people can afford it.

Opportunity to continue the studies after graduation from high school was there for everyone, the situation and number of colleges was growing, but the advantage was on the Boomer’s side. “By 1974, 60 percent of Boomer high-school graduates were able to

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<sup>70</sup> See Rushkoff, *GenX Reader*, 83.

<sup>71</sup> See Rushkoff, *GenX Reader*, 100.

<sup>72</sup> Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 106.

<sup>73</sup> Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 106.

<sup>74</sup> Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 106.

continue their education at the college level.”<sup>75</sup> There was also an ambitious grant programs where students could ask for a loan, programs which “were transforming the vision of college education for all into a reality. But then two decades later a strange thing happened; opportunity was reversing itself.”<sup>76</sup> The problems lie with tuition fees, which were growing drastically. Attending a private college did not cost much the Boomers, on average, the cost of a private college in 1978 was just \$5000, including all other expenses like room and board. This trend was slowly coming to an end when few years, concretely in 1992 it cost \$18,000.<sup>77</sup> When you consider that GenXer was earning almost the same money as Boomer and had to pay much more for education then, there has to be something wrong. “Skyrocketing costs were transforming higher education back from a universal dream to an elite privilege.”<sup>78</sup>

Higher education means a chance of getting a better job. But rising costs made it really difficult for GenXers. It is important to have a particular degree, the time requires that. But the economical situation did not help, students and people in general needed a degree for a quality job otherwise they had to work in low-paying service sector. Furthermore Generation X faced another problem, disappearance of high-paying jobs.<sup>79</sup> “College education is as much about survival as anything else. You no longer go to college just to learn. You go to college because you have to.”<sup>80</sup> Problem is that new employers might not look into someone’s CV to see from what kind of school he or she gained the diploma or what kind of degree he or she has. It seems that people are expected to gain at least something as it was people’s social engagement.

This led to a problem that at the time Boomers were graduating from college they had variety of job opportunities, “free from the burden of student loan debt.”<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, we have GenXer who did not enter the college due to a high price tag or graduated from college with a huge debt with no perspective of a quality job.

As a child of Boomers, more affluent generation, it seems that childhood was no real misery for GenXer. “This is a generation that was raised with the highest standard of living

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<sup>75</sup> Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 122.

<sup>76</sup> Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 122.

<sup>77</sup> Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 123.

<sup>78</sup> Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 124.

<sup>79</sup> Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 125.

<sup>80</sup> Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 125.

<sup>81</sup> Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 129.

in the history of the world.”<sup>82</sup> Parents were well established, could afford to indulge their children. And they did. “Growing up in the ‘70s and ‘80s, the twentysomethings were indulged with every toy, game and electronic device available.”<sup>83</sup> GenXer had everything a small kid ever dreamt of. As Neil Howe and Bill Strauss try to depict the typical bedroom of teenager in their book *13 Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* “TVs. VCRs. Boomboxes. Five-disk CD players. PCs hooked to speakers and stuffed with games. Porta-phones with caller ID and answering machines. Pushbutton remote controls lying around everywhere. That’s the pop image of the 13er teenage bedroom.”<sup>84</sup> Young adults were spending a lot of money during the weekends in a mall, using their credit cards, buying useless things. Driving convertible cars to high-school seems they do not know anything about the value of money. Parents owning a house with five bedrooms, double garage, stuffed fridge and a huge TV spoil their children.<sup>85</sup> They were surrounded by luxury.

Because of this, it is quite surprising that one of the things they hate the most is marketing and consumerist society. As Dag declares: “I felt that there was no possibility of being the ideal target market any more.”<sup>86</sup> It shows how disaffected they are towards any kind of marketing or advertisement. They do not want to be a part of such a society. Shopping malls were everywhere. They cannot believe what is happening with the society. And the departments in those shopping malls are simply unbelievable for them since “kitchens became the Food Fair; living rooms the Fun Center; the bathroom the Water Park.”<sup>87</sup> Shopping becomes fun, people are spending their time in shopping malls not just because of shopping, they want more they want to feel relaxed, enjoy it. This is something they cannot understand. All they want is to get on well with each other, have no problems, have fun and profound conversation, so they can not believe that people “embrace and believe the pseudo-globalism and ersatz racial harmony of ad campaigns engineered by the makers of soft drinks and computer-inventoried sweaters.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> David Martin, “The Whiny Generation,” in *GenX Reader*, ed. Douglas Rushkoff (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 236.

<sup>83</sup> David Martin, “The Whiny Generation,” 236.

<sup>84</sup> Howe, Neil, and Strauss, *13th Gen*, 101.

<sup>85</sup> Howe, Neil, and Strauss, *13th Gen*, 101.

<sup>86</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 35.

<sup>87</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 80.

<sup>88</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 122.

The Generation X is part of the commercial world no matter if they want or not, everything seems commercialized and they like it, “they actually enjoy advertising and are less cynical towards marketers and advertisers than Baby Boomers were in the ‘60s.”<sup>89</sup> They enjoy commercials and the way the products are marketed and it does not mean that they are into the product itself.<sup>90</sup> There is a term which can be used for things and goods. The term “merched”<sup>91</sup> is described in *Generation X Field Guide and Lexicon* and it says: “The commercialization of anything, but particularly things seen as representative of Generation X. Being merched is often not a good thing. It implies that one has sold out in some sense. Whatever it is that has been merched, it then stops being itself and becomes product.”<sup>92</sup> For GenXers it is definitely not a good fashionable thing, being labeled like this. Looks like they are aware of the fact that commercials and advertisements just want to sell their myth to them. They show some skepticism towards the advertising. As a proof, one of the chapters in *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* from Coupland is called “I am not a Target Market.”<sup>93</sup> Enjoying and having fun about advertisements does not mean that they will go for it and buy it. It is simple, because “if anything is seen as mainstream, they lose interest.”<sup>94</sup> The fact is that they are hundred percent against any kind of trend. They do not care so much about clothing. “The grunge look”<sup>95</sup> is the way they like it, the style of Nirvana rock band. Everything is turned into a trend and that is why they are against it. “When faced with a trend, slackers are more likely to shrug and dismiss it with one word: Whatever.”<sup>96</sup>

Maybe the problem lies within their expectations of life. They tried to chase the American Dream and they were not successful. They cannot match their parents’ success. They were used to spending sprees and high standards of living which they do not have on their own. The expectations were probably too high. They imagined themselves at high-paying job immediately after they left the college, or even worse, after they finished their

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<sup>89</sup> Cohen and Krugman, *Generation Ecch!*, 19.

<sup>90</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 179.

<sup>91</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 110.

<sup>92</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 110.

<sup>93</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 20.

<sup>94</sup> Cohen and Krugman, *Generation Ecch!*, 19.

<sup>95</sup> Mark Saltveit, “Whatever,” in *GenX Reader*, ed. Douglas Rushkoff (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 52.

<sup>96</sup> Mark Saltveit, “Whatever,” 52.

high-school. But it is not the reality, it does not work like that. They were used to all these high-tech devices, expensive clothes, but when they had to stand on their own feet, they struggled. They wanted all those things they had before. Getting a good job is a long-term process. It is called career, which is supposed to be built over some of period time. Some lucky individuals get those high-paying jobs, but generally people have to start from nothing. It is going to take some time before they can buy a car, five bedroom house and chase the American Dream. The problem of GenXers is that they do not understand that their parents are no longer there to indulge them.

This may lead to another interesting fact in the lives of GenXers. After leaving a high-school or college, they are more likely to come home after some period of time spent on their own. In *Generation X Field Guide and Lexicon* we can see the term “Boomerangs”<sup>97</sup> which refers to this group of people. The reasons were described earlier. The only difference is that they are no longer teenagers, they are young adults. Surely, having all that high-tech devices and stuffed fridge is a nice thing to have again, but it is not the same as it was few years back. The carefreeness is gone. They feel some responsibility as they want to live on their own, earn their own living. They cannot comply with market requirements. They feel some kind of failure that they are not able to leave their home. Parents also feel the failure for not raising and preparing their children for real life.<sup>98</sup>

“As they shield their eyes with Ray-Ban Wayfarer sunglasses, and their ears with their Model TCD-D3 Sony Walkmen,”<sup>99</sup> it seems that Generation X is addicted to marketing. And marketers are more than aware of this as GenXers “purchase \$125 billion worth of goods and services every year.”<sup>100</sup> It is a huge amount of money and marketers are not blind, they turn their attention “to the generation whose wallets will drive American culture for the next thirty years.”<sup>101</sup> America is all about the money, everything is connected with money. The American Revolution was also about the money. Of course, colonies wanted the independence, but major factor was the money, because every goods made in the New World were with the tariff from Great Britain, so they could not simply made as much money as they would like to. In The American Civil War was the same motive.

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<sup>97</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 26.

<sup>98</sup> See Howe, Neil, and Strauss, *13th Gen*, 65.

<sup>99</sup> Howe, Neil, and Strauss, *13th Gen*, 7.

<sup>100</sup> Cohen and Krugman, *Generation Ecch!*, 18.

<sup>101</sup> Cohen and Krugman, *Generation Ecch!*, 19.



Agricultural society together with slavery in the South and on the other hand more developed industrial society in the North. It was again about the money, not only about the abolition of slavery. Northerners wanted to industrialize the South, thus it could make more money than agriculture. It is not different in Europe, everyone is after the money, society is driven by the money but it seems that in US the feeling is stronger than anywhere else. America is one big factory for making money and they are successful, it is a one of the world leading powers, where markets of other countries depend on the American one.

Americans are known to have some problems with obesity because of their eating habits and since the arrival of the cheap food chains like Wendy's, McDonald's, KFC and Burger King. This is just a few of many. The reason why they eat like this is simple, it is cheap, it is fast, maybe it is also connected with easiness, because it is much easier to buy a meal in a few seconds than spend some time with preparing it, but what is the worst is the fact that children eat those fat meals also in schools. And when they get home, the situation is not any better. They have pre-packaged meal or whatever they can microwave. But they should not forget that "you are what you eat."<sup>102</sup> As Andy says "marketing is essentially about feeding the poop back to diners fast enough to make them think they're still getting real food."<sup>103</sup> Andy is angry about the fast foods because it is the main reason why his father got heart attack, this accident scares his father that much that he decides to change his eating habits.

To think about the fast foods, we should also mention the environment which is a big issue in almost every developed country. Ecology and recycling is also issue for the characters of *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* as Dag describes the situation with her mother when she put "all the dinner thrash into a huge nonbiodegradable bag."<sup>104</sup> Dag points out that it is better to use a degradable bag and she realizes that he is right. What happens next is shocking. She grabs the right one and all the thrash with the wrong bag puts into the new one.<sup>105</sup> And as Dag puts it: "The expression on her face was so genuinely proud that I didn't have the heart to tell her she'd gotten it all wrong."<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 21.

<sup>103</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 33.

<sup>104</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 95.

<sup>105</sup> See Coupland, *Generation X*, 96.

<sup>106</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 96.

What might look interesting is the fact what money and power can do with people and how they are perceived by others. Americans might be seen as two-faced very self-confident people by a lot of people. The root of all this is that from childhood when they are told that they are the best, the American Exceptionalism. And this is exactly what Dag, Andy and Claire hate. They describe one of the guys they meet that “he has one of those bankish money jobs of the sort that when, at parties, he tells you what he does, you start to forget as soon as he tells you.”<sup>107</sup> One day Claire receives bunch of roses from Tobias, her new suitor, and as she tells everyone about Tobias and what he did, she realizes that it is the most romantic moment of her life. What a surprise when later that day they all drive along florist’s shop and sees a sign with the words “100 Roses only \$9.95 spray painted on it.”<sup>108</sup> Maybe they are just jealous when somebody has the money, maybe they are not, not everybody likes this kind of attitude, when somebody wants to show off.

American society is driven by money, driving big cars, owning mansions, paying with golden credit cards, things that sometimes do not seem that important. They simply want to spoil themselves with the comfort. They like it. They like the money. There is a joke in the novel which goes like this: “There are three guys on a beach in Florida and one of the guys asks another one, ‘so where’d get the dough to come down to retire in Florida? Well, there was a fire down at the factory. A very sad affair, but unfortunately I was covered by the insurance’, so then he asks the other guy where he got the money to come down to retire in Miami Beach and the second guy replies, ‘Funny, but just like my friend here, there was also a fire down at my factory as well. Praise God, I was insured.’”<sup>109</sup> The joke continues when they ask the last guy where he got the money and he replies: “Just like with you guys there was a disaster at my place, too. There was a flood and the whole place got wiped out. Fortunately, of course, there was insurance.”<sup>110</sup>

“The two guys look really confused, then one of them says to the third guy, ‘I got just one question for you. How’d you arrange a flood?’”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 89.

<sup>108</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 90.

<sup>109</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 130.

<sup>110</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 131.

<sup>111</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, 131.

There is only one more fact that I would like to add to this novel. One of the heroes of this novel is called Dag and the author's name of this novel is Doug. We can only speculate to what kind of extent is this autobiography.

## 4 MICROSERFS

In this novel we might follow the life of a geek working for Microsoft named Dan and his fellow workers and roommates: Todd, Bug, Susan, Michael, and Abe. As we might see from the title of the book, the novel is about geeks from Microsoft working as serfs. Daniel is the narrator of the book, he is 26 and he works as a “tester – bug checker”<sup>112</sup> for the Microsoft company together with Todd who is really young, only 22, “the way Microsoft employees all used to be.”<sup>113</sup> Another co-worker named Susan is a real “coding machine”<sup>114</sup> as Dan puts it. She is the same age like Dan, 26 years old and she works for Mac Applications. Abe is the most experienced of those six nerds, working for Microsoft for over 8 years and he is sort of household banker as he collects their monthly checks for the landlord.<sup>115</sup> The oldest of the main protagonists is Bug and the best description of him would be that he is “fanatical in his devotion to Microsoft.”<sup>116</sup> The last character of this novel and Dan’s best friend is Michael, who seems to be a real geek living in a “mystical state.”<sup>117</sup> It looks like he was born to be a coder.

We should also say that despite all these problems with the Social Security, education and no job perspective which were described earlier, GenXers were not afraid to set up a business, to become entrepreneurs. The good thing about the market is that people can always find a gap in the market. It is only up to their skills and good ideas. As we know, Generation X witnessed the boom of the information technology which brought variety of new opportunities to starting entrepreneurs. “It’s been seared into the skulls of this generation that the American Dream is not accessible via the same paths their parents paved. So, in response, many are finding their own way to get it.”<sup>118</sup> Computers were not unknown for them, they grew up with them in their schools, maybe even homes. So there was a gap in the market, it was only up to them to fill it, so their American Dream of earning a lot of money, driving big cars and leading a contented life can come true.

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<sup>112</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004), 3.

<sup>113</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 11.

<sup>114</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 9.

<sup>115</sup> See Coupland, *Microserfs*, 10.

<sup>116</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 12.

<sup>117</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 13.

<sup>118</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon*, 163.

There they are, six people living together in Redmond, Washington State. They describe themselves as geeks or nerds as they are fully aware of their job and they know exactly how to speak of themselves. It is interesting to watch the way they live as it seems like a real depiction of IT workers. They are devoted to their jobs, which is opposite attitude to characters from *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. But still, what we have here are twentysomethings, the only difference seems to be their job, more precisely their career. The story of *Microserfs* takes place in early '90s which is short after the story of *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. They are also GenXers, "apparently we are all slackers,"<sup>119</sup> says Michael. Interesting fact is that GenXers are supposed to be not very well educated. This is not the case for Dan, Todd, Abe and others as we can see that they have necessary qualifications for a huge company like Microsoft. There is also another slight difference, it is mainly ambition they possess, it is obvious that they want to be successful and rich. As workers of this giant company, they have all the conditions to reach that point. This novel is much more positive, in everything these characters are doing.

Working for Microsoft does not seem like a Mcjob, there is some prosperity, prospect of career. They all seem quite happy with their job, they are hundred percent devoted to their position, "my universe consists of home, Microsoft, and Costco,"<sup>120</sup> says Dan. This is like typical world of geeks, almost ideal. It is funny to see how they talk about themselves. As one day Dan says "nerds get what they want when they want it, and they go psycho if it's not immediately available."<sup>121</sup> They are living in a "different" universe, all they care about is their shipping deadline and their PC working systems, spending long hours coding in their office behind the closed doors, they are perfectionists. "Doors sure are important to nerds"<sup>122</sup> as they want their privacy to plunge into their work. The life of geeks seems like no fun and for sure, they would like to have more spare time, having dates, fun and sometimes when they start doing something, get something going, then work takes over their life as they live day to day. It looks like all geeks end up living together in group houses, spending their whole time in their office coding and testing, unable to have real

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<sup>119</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 242.

<sup>120</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 3.

<sup>121</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 2.

<sup>122</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 3.

life. Their life is going in circle: work, sleep, work, sleep.<sup>123</sup> As Dan puts it one day: “I know a few Microsoft employees who try to fake having a life – many a Redmond garage contains a never-used kayak collecting dust. You ask these people what they do in their spare time and they say, “Uhhh – kayaking. That’s right. I kayak in my spare time.” You can tell they’re faking it.”<sup>124</sup> The life of IT workers seems to be all about the work.

Microsoft, “a place where they mow the lawn every ten minutes”<sup>125</sup> was a rapidly growing company at that time. Only in 1992 they hired slightly more than 3000 new employees. And people like Dan, Todd and other early 20s are the first one who has never known a world without an MS-DOS, the first generation used to this technological advancement.<sup>126</sup> Interesting remark about Microsoft is that there is a high fluctuation of its employees, everybody has its own estimated time of departure and its employees have to face the fact that not everybody can make it into management. On the other hand, people have much more stable position while working for Microsoft, it is far from being employed at McJob. A lot of people were offered employee shares and what they did was that they invested some of their money and watched the WinQuote, program designed to have information about your stock. Stock can go up and down. A lot of people can become millionaires and lot of people can lose their investments.<sup>127</sup> The work ethic of those nerds seems to be great as they really believe in the products they help to design. They are convinced that they are doing it for the good of a society. They have that right work ethic. As Susan says: “It’s always been us taking an intellectual pride in putting out a good product – and making money. If putting a computer on every desktop and in every home didn’t make money, we wouldn’t do it.”<sup>128</sup> That is their vision and vision of Microsoft: “a computer on every desk and in every home.”<sup>129</sup> They are determined to meet the expectations of their employer. The truth is that information technologies were expanding.

It has a negative effect on their life. Their demanding work and the fact that they stay at work until midnight then they come home, have a shower, three bowls of Corn Flakes for late dinner and ESPN actually does not seem like having a life. The job is satisfying but

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<sup>123</sup> See Coupland, *Microserfs*, 4.

<sup>124</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 4.

<sup>125</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 2.

<sup>126</sup> See Coupland, *Microserfs*, 16.

<sup>127</sup> See Coupland, *Microserfs*, 6.

<sup>128</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 9.

<sup>129</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 47.

what they miss is a real life and later they start to think about themselves and their future. One day Dan is thinking of his job and his job when he says: “Why am I bothering to get up? What is the essential idea that gets me out of bed and through the day? What is it that gets anybody out of bed?”<sup>130</sup> Maybe it is a matter of getting older, maybe the fact that Dan is in love with Karla, a girl he met in the Microsoft Campus and lives near by. He has enough working at Microsoft. He does not want to someone’s serf anymore. He just wants to change his lifestyle when his body is ignored in the pursuit of code all the years.<sup>131</sup>

The change comes with a new job. Dan and his housemates are all offered a job in a start-up company assembled by his best friend Michael in Silicon Valley. Michael invented a program which he called Oop!. It stands for “Object Oriented Programming.”<sup>132</sup> The description of this revolutionary product is that it is “virtual Lego - a 3-D modeling system with almost unlimited future potential”<sup>133</sup> As a result they all decide to join Michael’s new company and help him to fulfill his dream. Except for Abe who feels somehow obliged to Microsoft for giving him a chance. It is a great opportunity especially for Dan who felt it is a new hope of life. They cannot resist this temptation to join Michael and his ambitious new product.

The problem with a start-up company is that you need a lot of money and “trying to find money through venture capital is a long evil, conflictual process full of hype and hope.”<sup>134</sup> The best thing for Michael and his new colleagues is the truth that the information technology is undergoing huge boom so it is not that difficult to find some investors. Only if venture capitalists see some stability, then they will come in with cash.<sup>135</sup>

The most important thing for those geeks is the opportunity of being “One-Point-Oh.”<sup>136</sup> Be the first to do something new. This is exactly what they are after all the time. They have to be no longer ordered by management what to do, it is their own initiative from now on. Things starts to change for Dan as this is like a dream come true for him. Things look brighter than ever for him, although the situation is not the same for everyone. They are doing very well in a new company.

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<sup>130</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 25.

<sup>131</sup> See Coupland, *Microserfs*, 90.

<sup>132</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 70.

<sup>133</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 72.

<sup>134</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 117.

<sup>135</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 124.

<sup>136</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 87.

The main problem is with the relationships. Being addicted to information technology, they face problems like how to meet someone. Unable to start the conversation, they would rather prefer a conversation via e-mail. “They just figure that the relationship will naturally happen.”<sup>137</sup> As Susan once replies to a guy who addressed her: “You look more analog than digital.”<sup>138</sup> It seems that they do not know how to deal with the opposite sex. They just assume it is a user interface problem that it is not their fault and they will just wait for “the next version to come out – something more “user friendly.”<sup>139</sup> It is no surprise that Michael finds a new girlfriend on a social network, her nickname is BarCode. One day Michael asks Dan if he could go to Canada and meet BarCode instead of him. Dan is surprised but cannot turn down this plea. So instead of Michael it is Dan who has to travel a long distance to meet her. All Michael knows is his coding machine, having no idea how to deal with a woman.<sup>140</sup> The meeting goes well and that mystical person with a nickname turns out to be an attractive 20 years old girl named Amy.

Generally we might say that their life has become better, they are no more slaves of Microsoft. They are standing on their own feet, working on their own product. Life in Silicon Valley is different to life in Redmond, it is more about the money and being successful. “Everything in this Valley revolves around \$\$\$.....EVERYTHING!”<sup>141</sup> On the other hand, they like that. In Microsoft, it is all about the work, but in Valley it is also about success, to show off your wealth. People are supposed to own big house with swimming pools, expensive European or Japanese cars, when “NO CAR=NO LIFE,”<sup>142</sup> have the perfect relationship with someone who is well-dressed and has some extra money to spend lavishly at the parties so everyone can see what a great life these rich men have.<sup>143</sup>

In their spare time they talk a lot about the marketing and the fact that they have become the victims of commercials and consumerism. They have no belief in the advertisements because it seems that whatever those people who are making those commercials put on a label, people will believe.<sup>144</sup> Their escape from reality is watching

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<sup>137</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 227.

<sup>138</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 226.

<sup>139</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 227.

<sup>140</sup> See Coupland, *Microserfs*, 324.

<sup>141</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 117.

<sup>142</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 322.

<sup>143</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 226.

<sup>144</sup> See Coupland, *Microserfs*, 84.



their favorite series, it is their “Melrose Place night”<sup>145</sup> and as an hors d’oeuvre the 90210 series is served.

It seems that the novel is as a critique of those ill-considered start-up companies, mainly the dot.com start-ups which were receiving huge amount of money as they entered the stock markets. They were at the centre of attention of investors and were provided with huge loans from banks because Silicon Valley was a place “where sexy new technologies were being blueprinted.”<sup>146</sup> The problem was that those companies were producing very little and their stocks were overvalued. It resulted in a bankruptcy of many dot.com companies, the crisis is known as a dot-com bubble.

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<sup>145</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 124.

<sup>146</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs*, 137.

## 5 GENERATION A

Five different characters from different parts of the world are stung by the bees. It is nothing extraordinary. Only the fact that the bees were thought to be extinct. Harj, Zack, Samantha, Julien and Diana are the main characters of Coupland's latest novel. Harj who lost his parents and brother after the tsunami in 2004 is working in a call centre for Abercrombie & Fitch in capital city of Sri Lanka. He is responsible for North American Midwest as he is in "love of American-produced global culture."<sup>147</sup> Zack is from Iowa, he is farmer of his own cornfield. His only pleasure is to chop out a ten-acre masterpiece into cornfield observing it thanks to a real-time satellite camera. Among one of his another excess is his best friend who pays him hundred dollars to watch him work nude in a cabin of his corn harvesting combine. The fact that his friend is in another hemisphere does not make real difference.<sup>148</sup> Samantha is not that different from Zack. She is from New Zealand and her deviance is called an "Earth Sandwich,"<sup>149</sup> it is an Internet thing of creating art. The purpose of all this is to locate the exact opposite place on the planet using the online maps, put one slice of bread on the ground, connect with the person on the opposite place and if he or she agrees to put a slice of bread on the ground, then we have sandwich – two slices of bread with a planet between them.<sup>150</sup> Julien is a Parisian living in the World of Warcraft, spending hours and days playing this game. He is more like avatar than human being. Using his avatar in the online world. And the last character of this novel is Diana from Ontario in Canada, named after Princess of Wales, she struggles to find a real date, desperate to be with someone. Actually she is in love, the only problem is that she is in love with someone who is already married.<sup>151</sup>

Only thing that these five people have in common is their sting. The last of Coupland's novels is prominently similar to *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. "It's not just the title of his latest novel that leans heavily on his previous work: the framed narrative structure, in which a series of interconnected stories are contained within the main text."<sup>152</sup> *Generation A* depicts a near future where the bees died out and nobody knows why. What

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<sup>147</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Generation A* (London: William Heinemann, 2010), 26.

<sup>148</sup> See Coupland, *Generation A*, 6.

<sup>149</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 9.

<sup>150</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 9.

<sup>151</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 19.

<sup>152</sup> Gordon Darroch, "Generation Without a Sting," *The Herald*, (2009), <http://www.proquest.comumi>

is more interesting is the fact that almost nothing has changed as a result of the insects' mass extinction.<sup>153</sup> Someone might have thought that extinction might cause the total extinction of humankind, but nothing like that happens, people are living the same way as they were before. The only difference here is the incoming new drug released by pharmaceutical industry called Solon. The drug designed to change the person's sense of time. The immediate effect would be nothing but in a longer perspective it would make people feel that time is moving more quickly, resulting in no anxiety about the future.<sup>154</sup> The new drug becomes an instant menace for its users.

After these five people are stung by the bees they are immediately taken and subjected to a number of psychological tests to help determine what attracted the bees to them. Shortly after they are released from research facilities, they realize that they have become famous, thanks to the Internet. Everything is available thanks to the Internet, everything seems to be broadcasted, even their stay in research facilities. They try to live a life as celebrities, but they find it very difficult as they cannot believe anyone else, they decide to meet together and this chance comes up from a mysterious scientist who takes them to a remote island in British Columbia. As soon as they arrive they are told "to make up stories and tell them to each other."<sup>155</sup> Without TV, Internet it seems like they have no other choice. So they do. From those short stories we might understand that they are disappointed with their lives and the world itself, which is no shift from feelings of GenXers. The world has turned into "one massive hamburger-making machine."<sup>156</sup> Not happy with the eating habits which got only worse after the extinction of bees, they have to use the surrogates of the natural products. They face the "pollination crisis."<sup>157</sup>

Unhappy with their lives they continue to tell stories and it is obvious that they struggle to invent some stories due to a fact that they are all addicted to online world. Without Google, Youtube, Facebook and Twitter it is a huge problem for them. It is mainly Harj who dreamed about the America as a great place and he was right to some extent as he puts it like this: "I imagined teenagers having sex to loud music and parents

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<sup>153</sup> See Gordon Darroch, "Generation Without a Sting."

<sup>154</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 255.

<sup>155</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 156.

<sup>156</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 17.

<sup>157</sup> Joseph Salvatore, "Stung Together," *New York Times Book Review*, (2010), <http://www.proquest.com>

with no morals having flings inside unnecessarily large vehicles.”<sup>158</sup> He dreamed about a place where “outlet malls are always beautiful and are kept at a temperature just cool enough to require wearing a sweater.”<sup>159</sup> Soon he becomes disillusioned about his dream as he realizes that what seemed like a utopia turned to dystopia. Mainly due to a fact that the Americans cannot even remember his name and rather call him Apu. In fact, they “can only absorb one foreign-sounding word or a name per year. Past examples include Häagen-Dazs and Al-Jazeera.”<sup>160</sup> People are not nice to him as there seems to be some kind of prejudice or maybe just lack of willingness to learn his real name.

As they are addicted to information technologies and the World Wide Web they talk about their stories like they were written in Blogs. They cannot imagine their life without laptop or PDA. And as they gain the access to Serge’s laptop they keep looking for some new stories, unable to make up their own. Serge is the mysterious scientist who holds those five people in a remote place, far from civilization. If there is a dubious story and someone does not like it and asks the person how he comes up with such a story, there is always one-word answer: Google. This leads to big arguments among “patients” about the language and its disappearance or more precisely the way they “collapsed and contracted.”<sup>161</sup> People cared more about grammar and rules and now it seems they are speaking the same way they are texting.

Longer they stay on that remote island more they doubt about the purpose of their stay and do not understand the reason to tell the stories. They want to know the truth about their sting and everything what is going on around them. Everything is becoming clear as they threaten Serge and keep him as their prisoner. Serge makes a confession. As he tells them, they were the first who “experienced a shock reaction to the drug.”<sup>162</sup> It means that they represent real troubles for producers of Solon, their bodies contain something that resists the new drug. It is a hope for people that antidote can be created. “That way drug-makers could have it both ways: money from getting people hooked; money from getting people unhooked,”<sup>163</sup> says Harj. But the truth is somewhere else. They are right to some extent, the

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<sup>158</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 62.

<sup>159</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 63.

<sup>160</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 60.

<sup>161</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 246.

<sup>162</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 257.

<sup>163</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 257.

problem is that scientists and namely Serge do not want to create antidote to the drug. They found out, that their brains “secreted massive amounts of the rare molecule that, when tweaked, served as a cheap, easy starting point for Solon.”<sup>164</sup> The main problem of the Solon is that it makes people the same, “if you eat stuff made from our brains, you become one of us.”<sup>165</sup> The bees are actually the ones who stop the further production of Solon, they committed a suicide only to remind the humankind that there is still a hope for them.

Although the novel is set in the near future, it is a critique of today’s pop culture and the fact that people spend more and more time logged on to social networks. It looks like a warning for the future.

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<sup>164</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 282.

<sup>165</sup> Coupland, *Generation A*, 295.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to illustrate the generations, their problems and some alternatives as a main theme according to Coupland's three novels.

Coupland's very first novel, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* is a story about three young adults Dag, Claire and Andy who are representing the Generation X. They are part of the society they hate. At the times of problems with education and the Social Security the future does not seem very bright for them. But this is not exactly what lies heavily upon them. It is mainly the marketing and the omnipresent consumerism which makes them upset. Far away from home and their families they turn their anger towards their parents and older people who had more. Disillusioned by the state of the society, they resignedly work at McJob as they cannot see any prosperity in whatever they are doing.

A feature common in Douglas Coupland's novels is the criticism of pop culture and society's obsession with consumerism. This feature is also present in *Microserfs*, the story about the geek named Dan and his fellow workers as they chase their dream to have their own company. They give up working for Microsoft to join a start-up company. They want to be their own masters. The only major problem they face is a venture capital and how to reach it. But soon they realize that it is not a problem because of the boom of information technologies. They are part of the same generation as Dag, Claire and Andy, but unlike them serfs are far more positive in every aspect of their life. They do not affect resignedly, they have the determination to do something with their lives.

What only looks like a criticism of loss of privacy in *Microserfs* turns out to be a real criticism and evolution of the information technologies and the fact that everything seems to be branded in Coupland's latest novel *Generation A*, where we are told the story about five different people who were stung by a bees who were thought to be extinct. It is a paradox that it is bees which save the humanity from collapse and usage of the new drug. Surrounded by high technologies and online worlds, people lose their ability to communicate among each other without social networks and thanks to the Internet they lose their privacy, everything is broadcasted nowadays.

The main theme seems to be an establishment of their own company in *Microserfs*, where the characters of the same generation have the willingness to do something with their future. Unlike the protagonists from *Generation X*, who affect resignedly, the geeks want to start their own business, to take care of themselves. They are unsatisfied only at the beginning, soon they realize that the future is in their own hands and it is solely up to them

how their future is going to look like. It looks like that the characters from *Generation A* learn a lesson from serfs and the novel seems to end in a very positive way. It is not only a letter 'A' from the title of the novel that indicates the beginning of something new. As they return to their everyday life full of hope they have come to realize that they have the ability to change their life, their future.

There is no real shift between *Generation X* and *Generation A*, the only difference seems to be the time in which the stories take place. Consumerism and criticism of today's society is the main aspect of all three Coupland's novels and it makes all readers able to relate themselves to the problems depicted in Coupland's novels.

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