Generation Y Are Failing to Put Money Where Their Mouths Are

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Abstract
Alan Ruby wishes students would use their economic clout in a more politically and morally meaningful way than purchasing organic burritos.

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The 20- to 30-year-olds who form the bulk of my students share a puzzling characteristic. They have no sense of their power as consumers or any willingness to use it to effect broader social change.

They opine often about the need for racial and gender equality, yet willingly use the products and services of homogeneous, male-dominated enterprises such as Google and Facebook. At both firms, just over one in five leadership positions are held by women and there are even fewer women in technical roles.

These students are like the Occupy Wall Street activists and their kin who railed against the wealthy 1 per cent yet seemed dedicated to Apple technology, produced and sold by an organisation that (legally) minimises its tax burden by parking profits in low-tax places such as Ireland and Nevada. These students support the fifth largest company in the US (according to the Fortune 500) by continually upgrading their smartphones and tablets.

They see no difficulty with using the Uber car service to get around, despite a scarcity of female drivers and claims that the company fails to pay drivers the minimum wage and that it could be doing more to ensure the personal safety of female passengers.

There are occasional forays from student and alumni groups advocating “socially responsible” and pro-environment investment strategies for university endowments, but those are focused on the institution’s money, not their own.

The United Students Against Sweatshops has been campaigning for university administrations to boycott sweatshops that produce licensed college and athletic clothing. Established about 15 years ago, USAS now has more than 150 campus affiliates across the country: about 3 per cent of 4,600 degree-awarding institutions in the US. USAS has three current campaigns: one targeting sweatshops; one supporting campus workers who are seeking better pay and conditions and wish to unionise; and the other to “Kick Wall Street Off Campus”. All use a range of tactics including “non-violent direct action and civil disobedience”, but do not seem to place much store on harnessing their own spending power to influence retailers that sell clothing emblazoned with college names and logos.

There is student activism around gay rights and marriage, but there has been no slowing in traffic into the Urban Outfitters store on campus, even though the company reportedly pulled an “I Support Same-Sex Marriage” T-shirt from its shelves in 2008 on the eve of California’s vote of Proposition 8. And while there are vigorous debates about the rights and wrongs of Israel’s relationships with its neighbours, those seldom shape the purchasing choices of individuals.

One area where individual preferences shape economic choices is food. The Chipotle chain close to campus charges $9 (£6) for a pork burrito and boasts that the pig was “responsibly raised”, with most of the ingredients organic and “locally sourced”. This is $4 more than a burrito from the nearby street cart. Sweetgreen, the salad chain, which is located close to Chipotle, also promotes its organic and locally sourced ingredients “from farmers we know”, and its kale Caesar salad is also $9. There is usually a queue at both places at lunchtime.

I may be nostalgic for the student activism of the 1960s and 1970s, but it is still a puzzle why the millennial generation does not exercise its economic clout in a way that is more politically and morally meaningful than paying a premium for organic burritos.