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# Social and Cultural Constructions of Ageing: the Case of the Baby Boomers

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## ◆ Abstract

This paper examines social and cultural constructions of first wave baby boomers, those born in the period 1945-1954. Boomers are depicted, variously, as bringing new lifestyles and attitudes to ageing and retirement; or heralding economic disaster; or placing fresh burdens on health and social care services. The paper seeks to explore narratives about the boomer generation, drawing on sociological studies, the mass media and cultural and social histories of the post-war period. The article provides a critical analysis of the construction of boomers as a 'problem generation', exploring this from the perspective of demography, consumption and politics. The paper concludes with a research agenda for further work around the boomer generation.

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## Keywords: *Baby Boomers; Generations; Demography; Consumption; Political Change*

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'Born absolutely in the centre of the Baby Boom....I remember above all the great sense of change running with great, and persistent, temporal certainty.... Teenagers had been invented; youth culture was heading for triumph; we....inhabited the glorious window between the Pill and the emergence of Aids'.

(Michael Bywater, 'Baby Boomers and the illusion of perpetual youth', *New Statesman*, 30 October 2006)

'It was this amazing confidence that infected a whole layer of young people in every country in the world ...the mood was one of triumph and defiance'.

(Tariq Ali, *Street Fighting Years: an autobiography of the sixties*, Collins, 1987)

'Clare's what we call a "senior boomer", someone whose done the course creditably, set aside substantial savings, gotten his kids set up at a safe distance, experienced appreciation in the dollar value of this family home (mortgage retired), and now wants a nice life before he gets too decrepit to take out the garbage'.

(Richard Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, Bloomsbury, 2006)

## ◆ Introduction

- 1.1 On August 19<sup>th</sup> 2006 former President Bill Clinton celebrated his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday with a party attended by 2,100 people and music provided by the Rolling Stones. Later in the year, at a contrasting social level, Sheldon Public Library in Birmingham, England, organised live music and food to mark the start, in December 2006, of its new *Benefit Baby Boomers* initiative. A Birmingham City Council spokesman commented: 'Some baby boomers have recently celebrated their 60<sup>th</sup> birthday and now may have specific information needs and requirements which impact on the way services are delivered. We have a neighbourhood office advisor on hand [in the] library to help give advice'<sup>[1]</sup>.
- 1.2 Responses to the boomers coming of age have, though, been equivocal with commentators highlighting the economic costs that might follow from large cohorts leaving employment (see further below). The narrative of population crisis and generational warfare – which emerged during the late-1970s and 1980s -shifted focus from an emphasis on elderly people to those in mid-life and early retirement.

Boomers became identified as a 'problem' group, to be managed by strategies including extending working life, voluntary work, or performing additional caring roles within the family.

- 1.3 This paper is part of a larger project examining the characteristics of the boomer cohort combining in-depth interviews, secondary data analysis and examination of media and cultural representations of the boomer generation<sup>[2]</sup>. It explores the nature of these representations, assessing their sociological origins and characteristics. Drawing upon a range of popular and academic material, the paper provides a critical assessment of dominant themes and images associated with boomer lifestyles and activities. The paper concludes with a summary of issues for further sociological research.

## ◆ Methodology of the Review

- 2.1 This paper reports on results from an analysis of social and cultural constructions of first wave baby boomers, defined here as those born in the ten years following the ending of the second world war (roughly 1945-54). The first step in the study was to examine themes from a mixture of sources covering boomers identified in two online data bases over the period 2002-2006: Ageline (maintained by the American Association of Retired Persons-AARP) and AgeInfo (held by the UK Centre for Policy on Ageing). Using 'baby boomer' as a key word, Ageline generated 613 citations for social science holdings for the period, these reducing to 431 discounting duplicates and articles of no or limited relevance to the baby boomer theme. Ageinfo, which is skewed towards material focusing on people 60 and over, generated only a small number of articles covering the period, most of which were included in Ageline. Separate analysis of this source was therefore dropped from the study.
- 2.2 The second step comprised a search of a variety of databases covering newspapers over the period 2002- to January 2007. Analysis focused on 256 articles identified with 'baby boomer' in the title, drawn from major UK newspapers together with some regional papers. The analysis used a data base called Proquest UK Newstand, an online news service providing access to the majority of UK national newspapers, including all the major broadsheets, some tabloids and some syndicated regional papers. This was supplemented by examining the first 250 articles (over the period January 2007) covered on the Google news website, these mostly comprising American titles. Finally, in respect of media sources, Ex-President Clinton's 60th birthday was treated as a 'coming of age' of the boomers and responses to this were studied by examining material drawn from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) web site for August 2006.
- 2.3 Material from the above was further supplemented by bibliographic searches for surveys and articles covering the baby boom generation, mainly in the UK and USA but also in Australia, Canada and France. Finally, context for this material was provided by drawing on a number of histories of the 1950s and 1960s, in particular those by Marwick (1998), Clarke (1999), Sandbrook (2005; 2006), Judt (2006) and Hennessy (2006).
- 2.4 The analytical strategy was developed through content analysis (Silverman, 1993) and was broadly numeric and inductive with counts made of dominant issues and then further refined. This strategy was chosen in preference to a more interpretative approach (McQuail, 2000) since we are not making significant inferences in this paper about audience response. This article seeks to explore portrayals of the baby boom generation given a background of debate about the nature and implications of population change. Boomers are depicted, variously, as bring new lifestyles and attitudes to ageing and retirement; or heralding economic disaster; or creating long-term pressures for health and social care services. Understanding the way in which ideas about 'baby boomers' are constructed is important for deepening our understanding about the way in which society responds to population change, its views about the possibilities and potential of such change, and the range of images which people can draw upon for their own assessment of this period.

## ◆ Constructing the 'Baby Boom' Generation

- 3.1 Various interpretations can be placed upon the idea of the 'baby boom' generation. From a demographic perspective, attention is focused upon the rise in the birth rate across a range of industrialised countries immediately following the end of the Second World War<sup>[3]</sup>. The trend here was, in reality, highly variable: some countries (e.g. Finland) had a relatively compressed surge in birth rates following demobilization, this coming to an end at the beginning of the 1950s (Karisto, 2005; Ogg and Renaut, 2006). Others (e.g. Australia and the USA) experienced a longer period of increasing birth rates – from the mid-1940s through to the mid-1960s (McKay, 1997; Whitbourne and Willis, 2006). The UK had a distinctive pattern of two separate peaks in the birth rate- in 1947 and 1964. In comparison, Germany experienced no real baby boom and only a moderate increase in the birth rate in the early sixties<sup>[4]</sup>.

- 3.2** From a sociological perspective, boomers have been viewed as having distinctive experiences that set them apart from previous generations. Gilleard and Higgs (2002: 376), for example, view them as a 'mid-century generation' who have set a 'new and distinct course through adult life...one marked by change, challenge and transformation'. They argue that: 'The baby boom generation broke the mould of the modern life course'. Edmunds and Turner (2002:31) suggest that in the UK the boomers were a 'strategic generation in aesthetic, cultural and sexual terms'. They go on to argue that: 'The post-war baby-boomers were the first generation to live through a time when a mass consumer revolution transformed popular taste and lifestyles'.
- 3.3** More negatively, boomers have also been targeted as bringing instability to pension arrangements and social security. This became a familiar theme in the USA in the late-1980s, where boomers were charged with creating generational inequities and saddling their own children with unsustainable debts (Longman, 1987; Peterson and Howe, 1988). It was subsequently to re-surface a decade later with concerns voiced about the economic and social costs arising from a large generation entering retirement (Koltikoff and Burns, 2004; Islam, 2007).
- 3.4** At one level, boomers have drawn attention away from elderly people in respect of anxieties about the likely impact of population change (Walker, 1998). The question here, though, concerns the way these are being constructed and the options for the future of ageing they might suggest. To explore this we have looked at a variety of sources to assess how the idea of a 'baby boom' generation is being debated at the present time. The first stage was to identify the type of themes being associated with this group, illustrated through a mixture of sources including newspapers, broadcasting material and journals. The results from this were then 'triangulated' with general academic studies of the boomer generation or those providing a commentary on their cultural and social significance.

#### **Boomer Themes and Images**

- 4.1** In this section we consider the range of themes that appear to be associated with the boomer generation, as judged from the range of outlets considered for this study. Taking the AARP database first of all, the core 431 articles were classified into 11 different themes: general surveys (including attitude surveys); marketing; care and family; volunteering; commentaries (political and social); economics and finance (including pensions); work and retirement; health; leisure; housing; and other. Across this broad range of areas, three appeared to be of particular importance – economics and finance, work and retirement, and health – these accounting for 45 per cent of items over the period examined in the data base<sup>[5]</sup>. The first of these was wide-ranging in the subjects covered, from general assessments of the impact of the boomers on the economy (these often attempting to counter more alarmist predictions about their possible cost), to studies of financial planning, implications for Social Security and Medicare, and consumption needs of boomers. Work and retirement was a particularly interesting item with a strong emphasis on the desirability (apparently supported by boomers themselves) of people working on into their 60s and beyond to provide both individual financial protection and in social terms to cushion the impact of a large cohort entering retirement. The area of health identified a relatively narrow range of issues, with a particular focus on public health issues and the likely impact of boomers on the costs associated with long-term care.
- 4.2** Only a small proportion of items for the period selected – 41 in total – covered surveys about the baby boomers and few of these could reasonably be said to be scientifically based investigations. AARP of course organises its own survey (e.g. AARP, 2004) which has undoubted strengths but also some limitations in respect of the range of issues covered. There are also those listed from independent research centres (e.g. the Pew Research Centre 2005) in the USA, Demos (Huber and Skidmore, 2003; Harkin and Huber, 2004) in the UK, and the Australia Institute (Hamilton and Hamilton, 2006). These are further supplemented by organisations such as banks (e.g. the Merrill Lynch New Retirement Survey<sup>[6]</sup>) sponsoring surveys covering boomers. However, the value of some of these studies is difficult to assess, either because of doubts about sample derivation or because the survey is strongly associated with messages about boomer lifestyles linked to the interests of the organisation sponsoring the study.
- 4.3** A small but significant group of studies listed focused upon specialist themes, with issues about income and earnings a notable example. Hughes and O'Rand (2004), for example, examine household and income inequality among boomers, demonstrating that while they have attained a higher standard of living than their parents they also experience greater inequality. The researchers also distinguish early (1946-1955) and late (1956-1964) boomers, with the former having both higher levels of wealth and lower levels of debt than the latter. Such findings are also confirmed in the work of Butrica and Ucello (2004) who, based on a sample of 100,000 households, modelled future income levels for boomers and earlier birth cohorts at age 67, through to 2050. Again, their findings confirm the advantages of early

over late boomers, though as with Hughes and O’Rand (2004) the researchers stress the importance of within-cohort differences among boomers, with vulnerable sub-groups including never married and divorced men, high school dropouts and minorities.

- 4.4 There are a limited number of scholarly investigations of social and family relationships among boomers<sup>[7]</sup>. Putney and Bengtson’s (2005) was one of the more significant of those listed, with the experience of baby boomers highlighted in a longitudinal study of five cohorts of women. An interesting finding from this study was that boomer women appeared to be significantly more depressed and to have lower self-esteem in comparison with other cohorts, despite social and economic advantages. Earlier cohorts were not confronted with juggling work and caring roles in the same way as boomer generation women, with the latter experiencing greater pressures due to more intensified demands from work and family ties alongside the growing contingency of marriage.
- 4.5 The limited attention to changing social relationships affecting boomers is matched by the lack of systematic work in areas such as leisure and lifestyles. There is a small group of articles (33) that can be classified under this heading but most are commentaries or predictions about changing attitudes or needs which are likely to affect particular services – library provision being one of the most commonly discussed. A related category – though again relatively small in number (16) – picks up on the issue of volunteering or what has been termed in the USA ‘civic engagement’. The theme here concerns how boomers have the capacity to ‘reinvent ageing’ (Harvard School of Public Health, 2004) or ‘re-define retirement’ (Harkin and Huber, 2004; Freedman, 2002), exploiting their access to various forms of social capital accumulated over the life course (Wilson and Simson, 2006).
- 4.6 Despite the wide-ranging and ambitious scope of the last theme, most of the items in the AARP database, at least for the period covered, are considerably narrower in scope. Moreover, as already observed, systematic studies testing questions or hypotheses about boomers, are relatively small in number. Harkin and Huber’s (2004: 12) comment about the lack of ‘original research’ in Britain on this group, would appear to have wider applicability – at least judging from the range of papers and studies covered in the AARP data base (see, also, Quine et al., 2006 for an Australian view). One important message, however, from at least some of the studies (e.g. Hughes and O’Rand, 2004) would at least suggest vigilance regarding excessive generalisations about the boomer generation, highlighting the degree of economic differentiation within the cohort and the contrast between early and later boomers. The difficulty here is these cautionary notes tend to be ignored in a public debate that is often hostile to the emergence of the boomer generation. This is illustrated by surveying some of the themes that emerge from major newspapers in the UK and USA, again covering the period 2002-2006.
- 4.7 Applying the categories used in the AARP database, the 256 items examined in UK papers had a strong emphasis on economic and financial issues or political and social commentaries. Excluding 37 articles that were duplicates or out of range, meant 51 per cent came into these categories. Much of the former focused on financial planning issues for boomers or problems associated with pensions; the potential of the boomer market for the leisure or finance industry was another major theme. At least some of these articles, however, took their cue or relayed stories from the ‘generational war’ debate in the USA and highlighted a more alarmist view of the impact of the boomer cohort:

*‘Baby boomers hit share markets’* (by selling their shares and buying bonds) (The Times, March 23, 2004);

*‘Baby boomers could spark house chaos’* (by cashing in their properties to fund their retirement) (Daily Record, June 7, 2004);

*‘Baby boomers threaten the war on global poverty’* (by forcing US government to cut aid programmes to secure funding of Social Security and Medicare) (Financial Times, July 26, 2006);

*‘Ageing baby boomers set to rock society’* (political backlash over pensions) (The Guardian, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003);

*‘As baby boomers grow old, it is the young who will pay the price’* (boomers benefiting from pensions and other assets denied to the young). (The Observer, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2003).

- 4.8 Again, if we look at 250 stories generated through the Google web site, discounting 47 (mainly) duplicate items, 52 per cent focus around three areas: economics and finance, political commentaries, and health. The general pattern of the first of these is similar to the above but with a cluster of stories associated with difficulties the boomer generation is likely to bring to the economy and the health care system. An



example here was the impact of the speech in January 2007 of the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank, Ben Bernanke, warning of the 'potential problems' associated with the 'looming retirement' of 78 million baby boomers. This producing headlines such as: '*Retiring baby boomers could "weaken" economy*' (The Buffalo News, Jan 19, 2007); '*Baby Boom Gloom from Bernanke*' (Forbes.com, 18, January, 2007); and '*Big Ben Warns of Boomer Time Bomb*' (New York Post, 19, January, 2007).

- 4.9** Such headlines are not, it must be said, representative of the general debate on economic and financial issues facing boomers, although particular views -such as those by Bernanke - have attracted significant discussion, notably in the US media where 'culture wars' between boomers and other groups have a sharper focus (Moody and Adler, 2006; although see Islam, 2007 for a British example). More typical is the presentation of views critical of boomers in social commentaries published in newspapers and political journals. The approach here is to view boomers as a 'selfish generation', benefiting from educational and welfare systems which they now seem intent to deny future generations. Again, this might be said to be a replay of the '*Worker versus Pensioner*' (Johnson et al., 1989) debate from the 1980s, but this time with an added moral as well as economic dimension. Prominent examples from the UK database of articles include:

*'Boomergeddon: the baby boomers who smashed down social and sexual barriers and who today run Britain boast of creating a gentler, more tolerant world. What about the shattering of the family, the end of civility, feral children and today's contempt?'* (Melanie Phillips, Daily Mail, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006).

*'Please, no more 1960s: Has any generation in history ever banged on about itself more and with less merit than the baby boomers?'* (Jonathan Freedland, The Guardian, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004).

*'Your 40-year high is over, boomers: Balding, wrinkled and stoned, the baby boomers have been hit by a backlash. [The boomers] have been re-assessed and found wanting.'* (Rosie Millard, The Sunday Times, February 5, 2006)

*'Baby boomers: and the illusion of perpetual youth': 'Greedy, trivial, venal, cosseted... The postwar generation of children grew up protected by cosy routine yet fearing nuclear annihilation. So, instead of becoming adults, they just got bigger, as did their toys and tantrums'* (Michael Bywater, New Statesman, 30<sup>th</sup> October, 2006).

- 4.10** Such comments reflects a more extensive critique of the boomer generation in North America, illustrated in books such as Queenan's (2001) *Balsamic Dreams: A Short But Self Important History of the Baby Boom Generation*, and Ricard's (1994) *The Lyric Generation: The Life and Times of the Baby Boom Generation* (see, also, Heath, 2006). These books have, on the other hand, themselves been countered by studies such as those by Steinhorn (2006) emphasising the achievements of the boomer generation in fighting for a more equal and tolerant society, and Achenbaum (2005: xi) who notes the potential of boomers 'positioned by historical circumstances': 'to modify and create organisational structures to promote productive, vital growth for the common good'.
- 4.11** Aside from economic and political commentaries about the boomers, articles about boomer lifestyles in respect of travel and leisure are another important theme in the UK newspaper database. Again, the interesting conclusion here is the relatively narrow range of issues around discussion about boomers, with surprisingly limited attention (in the UK context) to either health or work and retirement issues – though the latter has started to become more prominent with the emerging discussion around the possibilities for extending working life (Department for Work and Pensions, 2005; Biggs et al., 2006; OECD, 2006).
- 4.12** To what extent is the above observation replicated in other media, taking in this instance the BBC website and its celebration of the 'landmark generation' turning 60 in 2006? At one level this was presented as an opportunity for celebrating the achievements of boomers – in pioneering new lifestyles and challenging political orthodoxies. Steve Schifferes<sup>[8]</sup> notes how a large youth cohort began to demand: 'the expansion of economic benefits and personal freedom across the spectrum'. He goes on to cite the preface to the 1962 Port Huron Statement: the opening manifesto of the American Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), who were to lead the student revolt in the USA against the Vietnam war: 'We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit'. Examples are provided of the role of boomers in leading 'cultural change...and the sexual revolution...which seemed to promise more than something of the 1950s'<sup>[9]</sup>. Commentators such as Leonard Steinhorn (*The Greater Generation: In Defense of the Baby Boom Legacy*) are drawn upon to

make the case for the role of the baby boomers in campaigning for change in: 'their homes, communities, schools, workplaces, institutions, [and the] media'<sup>[10]</sup>, <sup>[11]</sup>

- 4.13** Yet, despite the achievements, an important part of the discussion concerns the long-term damage caused by the apparent 'uber-consumerism'<sup>[12]</sup> of the boomer generation - the spending of large amounts of money, often derived from housing wealth, to meet aspirations for goods and services. Brendan O'Neil begins his review of this theme with the comment: 'Baby boomers like to trumpet their generation's achievement. But their fondness for conspicuous consumption and foreign travel has led to many a modern-day ill, from rising debt to environmental woes'. This view is backed by some of the writers cited above and by the use of reports such as: 'Difficult Times Ahead for Baby Boomers?' these taking the view that: '...they [boomers] bear some responsibility for "social and moral decline"<sup>[13]</sup>. On their watch, "divorce rates have more than doubled, AIDS has overshadowed the joys of sexual liberation...and many.... have had to battle drug and drink addiction..."<sup>[14]</sup>. Alongside this, is the 'pensions crisis' brought by large numbers of pensioners: '...this bulge now poses an enormous problem to pension systems not just in the US, but in many other developed countries where the baby boom started later...The younger, smaller cohort will have to fund the costs of retirement for the baby boom generation, leading to a reduction in their living standards...The baby boomers will be having their final revenge on the system against which they initially rebelled'<sup>[15]</sup>, <sup>[16]</sup>.

### ◆ Developing a Sociology of the Boomer Generation

- 5.1** The above review indicates a range of anxieties that have begun to surface around the boomer generation. Boomers might well, to quote Gilleard and Higgs (2002), be breaking the 'mould of the life course', but this has begun to raise questions of affordability – moral as well as financial. Boomer demographics are seen as more than matched by an unhealthy zeal for consumption, with both elements now viewed as creating instability for the pension and health care system (Pensions Commission, 2004). Equally, concern is expressed about a looming crisis as boomers leave the world of production, to be replaced by a smaller cohort of workers (The Cabinet Office, 2000).
- 5.2** The above perspectives raise issues about the way in which boomers are being constructed as a 'problem generation'. Drawing on the above review, three areas might be identified that appear to be used for considering boomers in these terms: first, the relative size of the boomer cohort; second, its association with high levels of consumption; third, the potential role of boomers as a social and political force in securing high levels of health and social security. These aspects will now be examined, drawing on a range of studies covering the boomer generation, before the paper concludes with an assessment of future areas for research.

### ◆ Boomer Demographics

- 6.1** The relative size of the boomer cohort has been a major focus of attention for political and social scientists (Easterlin, 1987; Wister, 2005; Whitebourne & Willis, 2006). Much is made in the USA of the 'looming retirement' of the 76 million boomers born between 1946 and 1964 (translating according to the Census Bureau into 330 people reaching 60 every hour). In Britain, the numbers are smaller but still regarded as significant, with the peak of one million babies born in 1947 now entering their 60th year. The sheer size of the boomer cohort has been viewed as presenting distinctive problems: on the one hand, large birth cohorts are viewed as disadvantaged in respect of access to schooling and employment; on the other hand, they are seen to place a burden upon health and social resources at the end of the life course (Easterlin, 1987).
- 6.2** The 'volume' argument has had an especially strong claim in the USA and Canada, given the duration and size of the boomer cohort (In the USA more babies were born between 1948 to 1953 than in the previous three decades). Crystal (2007), however, cautions against what he terms as 'reductionist perspectives' that give undue weight to structural characteristics of cohorts relating to size. He makes the point that: '...each cohort experiences a historically and economically unique set of experiences that also shapes its outcomes'. Thus, in respect of boomers, we have to look carefully at the balance between advantages and disadvantages over preceding cohorts and as well the impact of within-cohort differences as opposed to averages across cohorts.
- 6.3** At the same time, the impact of cohort size is much less clear-cut for countries such as the UK where the post-war demographic 'peaks' were less pronounced and were not sustained as in the American, Canadian or Australian examples. Falkingham (1987: 18) notes that: 'Whilst the number of babies born in the UK in the years 1947 and 1964 exceeded 1 million, over the entire period 1947 and 1964 the number of births averaged about 800,000 a year. Therefore even the absolute peaks of the two baby

booms constituted only an additional 25 per cent of the average for the post-war decades'. Sandbrook (2005: 388), in his cultural history of the 1950s in the UK, suggests in fact that there was 'no real baby boom in Britain'.

- 6.4** But the symbolism of the rise in the birth rate was at least as important as its demographic aspects. The 'boom' may have been relatively small but it was significant as compared with the decline in fertility characteristic of preceding decades – this creating a sense of panic across many European countries (Stearns, 1977; Thane, 1999). Tony Judt (2005: 237), for example, sees the 'burst of fertility' as having momentous implications for a '[European] continent whose leading demographic marker since 1913 had been premature death'. Hence the emblematic nature of the boom (or 'baby bulge' as Hennessy (2006) notes it was first termed in the UK) as a marker of post-war revival was substantial.
- 6.5** Constructing boomers as a 'problem' in demographic terms might be challenged in fact on at least two counts. From a historical perspective, the existence of boomers can be seen as wholly positive, given their undermining of predictions (prominent in the 1930s) about the inevitability of population decline (Bouvier and De Vita, 1991). From an economic perspective, the heterogeneity of boomers would caution against a view which sees them as presenting a distinctive problem in respect of support in old age – many may bring advantages in respect of wealth and income which may transform traditional associations of old age with financial dependency (Evandrou and Falkingham, 2006). As regards health, variations among boomers – especially when viewed in a life course context – will be crucial. Crystal (2007) comments here that: 'Whereas the boomers' higher level of education may provide health advantages that could improve age-specific health status and the need for acute health care services, it might also contribute to an increased propensity to seek out services to ameliorate the health problems associated with aging... Boomers' health care behaviour in their pre-retirement years suggests that as they age, they may be less than accepting than earlier cohorts of functional decline as a natural part of the aging process and more assertive in seeking technological fixes to the problems of aging'.

## Boomer Consumption

- 7.1** A second element in debates and concern about boomers has focused on their pivotal role in the field of consumption. At one level this is hardly surprising given the positioning of boomers over the course of the 1950s and 1960s. There is, for example, general agreement in the research literature that we can see the post-war generation as 'constitutive of the rise of modern consumerism' (Edmunds and Turner, 2002:4). Trentmann (2006:252) goes further and argues that the 'consumer came to be seen as the fundamental historical agent around which a stable, democratic order was to be erected'. Gilleard and Higgs (2005:99) also emphasise the salience of consumption, placing this at the centre of lifestyles and social identities. They trace continuity between the consumption-orientated lifestyles of teenagers in the late-1950s and 1960s and the aspirations of people now entering retirement: 'Personal fitness and individual viability have become lifestyle commodities demanded by adults of all ages. The youth of the 1960s were not striving to look young or become rich; they wanted primarily to express their distance from the old by making themselves more flamboyantly radical. But as the youth of that period have grown older they have sought to retain the value and status of that "youth culture". They continue to care about clothing, about fashion, and about appearance, and they continue to care about having the freedom to spend'.
- 7.2** As the 'first ever generation to grow up in the "mass consumption" society' (Harkin and Huber, 2004: 30), it remains unclear how this experience will structure middle and old age. Thus far (judged from our media survey) the focus has been on the individualism of boomers and the potential impact this will have on transforming later life. Metz and Underwood (2005: 43), for example, draw the following conclusion about the boomer generation: 'The boomers are more individualistic than their parents, who experienced the collective solidarity of wartime; they are more anti-establishment and non-conformist, less deferential, less trusting of those in authority, less attracted to organised religion. The boomers are the first generation of the age of affluence, who have come to expect individual wants and needs to be satisfied and have been encouraged to define themselves by personal choices'. Harkin and Huber (2004:12) note the financial importance of boomers but suggest that this will be 'less important than the novel ways in which they will want to spend their money – and what they will expect in return'.
- 7.3** On the other hand, evidence about boomer individualism and 'excessive consumption' among boomers can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In the first place, evidence for *continuity across generations* is an important feature to emphasise. While the 'consumption' argument has tended to focus on the life histories of the boomer cohort, it is equally plausible to consider possible influences from their parents who in many respects (and especially for first wave boomers) had characteristics that had considerable influence on their children. In this context, it seems more relevant to view boomers as pursuing more 'individually-orientated' lifestyles as a *consequence* of the pattern of family life developed in the post-war

years. Here, the environment surrounding early boomers has been well documented: first, the surge in popularity of marriage during and immediately after the second world war, this providing the basis for high levels of domestic consumption (Sandbrook, 2005); second, the steady growth of owner-occupation during the 1950s and 1960s; third, the rapid growth of suburban living, in many cases reflecting inter-war expansion in the UK of private housing in larger cities such as London and Birmingham (McKibben 1998: 103) comments here that: 'The private housing boom [in the 20s and 30s] was as much a result of a decision to limit fertility as a cause of it; but in turn it assisted in the steady increase in the marriage-rate which permitted the 'baby boom' of the 1940s'; finally, the move towards residential segregation between generations (developing in the 1950s), as illustrated in the rapid decline of co-residence between older people and their children.

- 7.4** The 'heavy emphasis on re-building family life' (Wilson, 1977:60) in the 1940s and early 1950s was a major theme of social policy, resting of course on highly segregated roles between men and women. May (1999: 121), in an American study, refers to the development of a 'boomer ideology' based on the 'positive value' of having children: '...in the 1940s and 1950s, nearly everyone believed that family togetherness focused on children, was the mark of a successful and wholesome personal life'.
- 7.5** For boomers, though, we might want to trace a number of responses to the familial ideology that surfaced during the 1950s. In particular, this was a period when what was termed 'nuclear families' (Parsons and Bales, 1955) gave particular emphasis to consumption in the household in the form of home improvements such as gardening and do-it-yourself. Sandbrook (2005: 682; see, also, McKibben, 1998) comments: 'Amid all the excitement of the early sixties, gardening reflected what people saw as the stable, enduring virtues of Britishness: quietness, patience, decency, tidiness. On an average Saturday morning in December 1963, up to a million people might rush out to buy the latest number-one record. But, at the same time, a staggering nineteen million looked forward to another day pottering about in the garden and nursing their flowerbeds through the winter. The neat suburban garden was, at one level, a refuge from the changes of the decade; but it also reflected the increasing affluence and domesticity of family life in the post-war years' (see, also, Bhatti, 2006).
- 7.6** Boomers, in fact, were to continue much of the pattern established by their parents but as May (1999) suggests found additional outlets: 'Although some observers labelled the rebellious middle-class youths 'anti-materialist', the younger generation did not give up on consumerism. They simply took it outside the home. Expenditures for housing and household operations, which had increased in the post-war years levelled off in the 1960s, while recreational expenditures which had been stable in the 1950s, accelerated in the 1960s. Spending was hardly out of fashion, but consumers used their purchasing power for more individualistic, less familial purposes'.
- 7.7** To be sure, as May argues, it was the boomer's children who reacted against the 'containment' philosophy of the post-war family: '...post-war domesticity never fully delivered on its promises. The baby-boom children who grew up in suburban homes abandoned the containment ethos when they came of age. As young adults in the 1960s, they challenged both the imperatives of the cold war and the domestic ideology that came with it'. This was to become a major theme of feminist critiques emphasising the oppressive character of family life. Lynne Segal (1983:32) provided a further element to this in her influential polemic *What is to be done about the family?* Here, she took the view that:
- 7.8** 'There was little continuity from the youthful struggle of our parents to survive and raise their children through the hard work and sacrifice forced upon most people in the 1930s and 1940s, to the new values of consumer capitalism which developed with the relative prosperity of the 1950s. It was, in fact, capitalism itself which was to discover and build a new cult of youth aimed at the 'teenage consumer' with more money to spend, and easily able to spend it. A necessary part of this process was the switch from an emphasis on hard work and saving towards pleasure, excitement and self-fulfilment in leisure activities – as radio and television brought the advertising industry and pop music into the every home in the country'.
- 7.9** Although Segal (1983) is correct to emphasise the importance of consumption, the discontinuity with the previous generation is almost certainly exaggerated (see further on this point Sandbrook , 2005; 2006). For the boomer generation, consumption was to become embedded in family life, a feature which has continued into middle age with children staying longer at home and the accretion of roles linked to grand-parenting (Dench and Ogg, 2002) and the care of older parents (Mayer and Green, 2002). Ogg and Renault (2006:19), analysing data from a range of European countries, find that despite some country differences, in the main boomers continue to respond to 'the needs of their elderly ascendants in ways that accord with their resources and other responsibilities'.



**7.10** For some boomers, advocacy around consumer issues and rights may even have taken over from earlier political radicalism and non-conformism (Harkin and Huber, 2004). For yet others, consumerist ambitions may be frustrated by limited resources due to poor health, redundancy in middle age or failure to build an adequate pension (Phillipson and Smith, 2005). Hamilton and Hamilton's (2006: xiii) Australian study may have wider applicability in indicating the limits to consumption among the boomer generation:

'...the perception of the boomers as the "lucky generation", happily pioneering a trend towards the end of retirement, is simplistic and misleading. ...The popular idea that baby boomers are the "generation that will never retire" is one conditioned very much by the expectations of wealthier boomers. It may be true to say that the traditional notion of retirement is now aspired to only by the working class. The reality for most of these lower income earners is worry about how they will fund their retirement, and this is leading them to delay retirement' (see, also, Harkin and Huber, 2004: 103).

## Boomer Politics

- 8.1** Finally, the 'politicisation' argument, along with that relating to consumption, is probably the most familiar perspective on boomers i.e. the view that boomers by virtue of common experiences as a birth cohort might have shared social and political views as they enter retirement. This argument reflects partly the 'volume' aspect (raised in particular by North American commentators) but is also linked to experiences of social and political activism in the 1960s and early 1970s. Two Canadian commentators summarise both aspects as follows: '...baby boomers tend to be characterized by their access to upward social mobility, adherence to various liberation ideologies (Marxism, the anti-imperialism stemming from the Vietnam War, the cult of individuation, etc) and, above all, by their numbers' (Lavoie and Olazabel, 2005:2). In the UK, the 'first boomer' generation have been described as 'marching towards retirement' comprising a 'very distinct generation with different experiences, values and expectations from their parents' (Age Concern, 2005: 4). Although doubting the existence of an 'age interest' block, Age Concern (2005) further suggests that: 'there is a common world view and opinion is coalescing on many of the major issues'. Huber and Skidmore (2003: 98) identify a number of areas where they suggest that the boomers might exert influence:
- 8.2** 'The baby boomer generation has the potential to rewrite the political agenda: around the distribution of traditional forms of public spending; around the new politics, focusing more directly on 'quality of life' for individuals and communities; or with a generational clash of priorities around cultural values, cosmopolitanism and social equality. Far-sighted politicians and civic entrepreneurs should be turning their minds towards the issues that could act as mobilising flash points, with the potential to define political consciousness for a new generation'.
- 8.3** Against this, the literature on boomers suggests that any mobilisation is likely to be limited by important social and cultural divisions. First, the distinction between 'early' and 'later' boomers does not need to be laboured, with evidence for the economic advantages enjoyed by the former likely to generate political differences among boomers in areas such as pensions and social security (Evandrou and Falkingham, 2006; Hughes and O'Rand, 2004). Moreover, income and wealth divisions within the two groups will continue, these likely to become 'more pointed as the cohort continues to age' (Harkin and Huber, 2004: 103).
- 8.4** Second, the extent and nature of political activism in the 1960s and 1970s has itself been called into question. Tony Judt (2006) asserts here that: 'European teenagers of the late 50s and early 60s did not aspire to change the world. They had grown up in security and modest affluence. Most of them just wanted to look different, travel more, play pop music and buy stuff'. And Robert Putnam (2000: 258) cites the following observation from Delli Carpini: 'It is the rejection of mainstream politics rather than the development of an alternative political direction that most clearly distinguishes the sixties generation from preceding cohorts...In short, it is a generation which, relative to earlier generations, rejects the norms and institutions that are central to the political system of which they are a part. What distinguishes this generation most is what it does not like or does not do, and not what it likes or does'.
- 8.5** Third, although cohort size is often used to justify arguments for increased political activism, an alternative view is that as the size of the elderly population increases, the proportion making the effort to be politically active tends to decline. Williamson (1998: 56) suggests that the reason for this is that: 'As the size of an interest group increases, it tends to become more heterogeneous and more difficult to mobilize for collective action'. Moreover, the same author makes the point that any action that does emerge may not focus exclusively around age-related issues. In the case of the UK, such concerns will almost certainly feature among those with a limited pension and who in addition experience narrow options for high quality health and social care. On the other hand, boomers may also pioneer new

demands around ethical issues connected with the environment, food and wider global concerns. Boomer politics is thus likely to be as varied as demographic and consumption issues, much more so in fact than was the case with preceding generations.

## ◆ Conclusions

- 8.6 Despite the attention to boomers as a demographic phenomenon, it is clear that further work is necessary in respect of developing a sociology –or cultural sociology- of the boomer generation. Much of the attention to boomers has focused around a relatively narrow band of issues, with economic questions, personal finance and work and retirement drawing much of the attention. This much is perhaps not surprising. What is of concern, however, is that so little is known about the *context* within which these areas operate, notably in areas such as changing social attitudes of boomers, social relationships, and expectations about future lifestyles. Certainly, there is much comment about these areas; very little, however, in the way of systematic study testing particular research questions or detailed surveys of boomers.
- 8.7 There are though some important themes that we might want to identify from our discussion. Drawing on the themes outlined below, the following questions seem worthy of further study: \* Does cohort size influence identity in any sense? Do we have any indication that being a member of a (relatively) large cohort has impacted at all on how boomers view themselves? Are they aware of the labels attached to their generation? Has this any influence on their behaviour? \* Is there evidence for continuity in consumption through the life course, such as the retention of elements of a ‘youth culture’? Is their evidence for any long-term impact of the rise of the ‘teenager’ in the 1950s? Has this made boomers more aware of life course stages? What evidence is there for people thinking about consumption-related lifestyles for retirement? \* Do we have any evidence for residual rejection (arising from the long-term influence of feminism) of the family-based ideology which infused the households of boomer parents? Alternatively, do we see boomers as largely continuing the home-focused activities developed by their parents? \* What are the cross-cultural differences and similarities in the boomer generation? To what extent do these reflect demographic, cultural and social variations between countries? \* Finally, do we have any evidence for a return to community activism or a more collective approach to retirement? Alternatively, are boomers largely focused on individual-pursuits with a limited sense of a collective or unified identity?
- 8.8 Such questions underline the case for a sociological analysis of the boomer generation. A key element will lie in trying to understand the way in which this generation is being constructed at the present time and the social, cultural and political factors influencing the various elements involved. This paper begins this discussion by outlining the broad tone of the cultural climate constructing the ‘baby boomer’ stereotype. Baby boomers are almost certainly both *more* and *less* significant that appears to be accepted in the present debate. *More* significant in the sense that some groups of boomers may well re-shape growing old in distinctive ways, reflecting their involvement in leisure, consumption and caring roles. *Less* significant in the sense that many boomers will experience a life far removed from the optimistic images encountered in the media and marketing.
- 8.9 The most interesting aspect of the boomer generation may lie not in what they tell us about the shared identities and experiences existing among this group, but what they convey about the new inequalities likely to surface in retirement and late middle age. Cumulative advantage and disadvantage, and its implications for old age, have become an important area of study in social gerontology (Dannefer, 2003). The boomer generation is likely to underline this aspect of ageing, but with greater disparities and divisions – in life chances and expectations – as compared with previous generations of older people. A future sociology will need to balance the impact of such divisions with cultural constructions that raise the possibility of broadly similar needs and potential conflict with other generations in meeting these.

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## ◆ Notes

<sup>1</sup>‘Party for Baby Boomers’, Birmingham Mail, Dec. 15, p.23, 2006.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion about some of the ideas and empirical findings about baby boomers developed in the project see Biggs et al (2006) on policy issues and Biggs et al (2007) on consumption issues.

<sup>3</sup> Boomers are described in different ways, with the 'lucky generation' (Australia and the USA) and the '68 generation' (France, Sweden) among the most common labels.

<sup>4</sup>Falkingham (1987) provides a very useful summary of the demographic patterns.

<sup>5</sup>Some articles combined a number of themes. For this review we have taken the main issues discussed in the article in assigning it to a particular category.

<sup>6</sup>Details of the Merrill Lynch Retirement Survey can be found on <http://www.totalmerrill.com/retirement>

<sup>7</sup>Though searches of data bases with a psychological focus might yield more references in this area.

<sup>8</sup>Schiffes, S. 'Baby boom proves economic power'. <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/business/5241346.stm> accessed January 4th. 2006

<sup>9</sup>O'Neil, B. 'Baby boom...and bust', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4798825.stm> accessed January 4th. 2006.

<sup>10</sup>ibid.

<sup>11</sup>. See, also, the response to 'Baby boom... and bust' by John Levett 'Why I'm proud to be a baby boomer' and the subsequent contributions, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/5270654.stm> accessed January 4th 2006.

<sup>12</sup> O'Neil (2006)

<sup>13</sup>ibid.

<sup>14</sup>ibid.

<sup>15</sup>ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Buckley (2007) provides a fictional account of generational conflict over the 'excesses' of the boomer generation.

<sup>17</sup> Age Concern England formed an organisation called Heyday in an attempt to respond to the aspirations of the boomer generation.



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