

Chapter 2

The Baby Boom Phenomenon

Population—especially fertility—moves in mysterious ways (Le Bras 2007), the postwar baby boom being a case in point. Although flagging birth numbers classically recover in the wake of a conflict, the revival is generally short-lived. This makes the baby boom surprising on two counts, for not only did the birth rate start to rise while France and Britain were still gripped by war, but it remained high for several decades.

In a postwar context characterised by low agricultural and industrial production, as well as by the widespread destruction of buildings and the transport infrastructure, the baby boom threw up several challenges, the first being to recognise it for what it was (it was to take Alfred Sauvy a good 5 years to do so). The question was whether it was a *one off* that would simply peter out after a few years, or a lasting change, for as Rosental (2003) explains, “people still remembered how birth numbers had briefly surged at the end of the First World War, as a result of women catching up with the childbearing they had postponed until after the conflict”. This issue was of interest not just to academics, but also to politicians, as the baby boom was to have a long-term impact on societies, as we can see only too clearly today, with the current problems brought about by an ageing population and the debates on pension reform. Even after all these years, the sheer intensity and duration of the baby boom continue to surprise and astonish, and many questions remain unanswered.

2.1 The Unexplained Recovery in the Birth Rate

2.1.1 *What Was the Baby Boom?*

There are intriguing similarities in the changes in fertility that occurred both during and immediately after World War II in France and Britain. In 1942, for instance, a reversal of the prevailing downward trend was observed in both countries, with a return to levels last seen in the early 'thirties. This was followed by a rapid acceleration, resulting in figures that had rarely been recorded in the twentieth century.

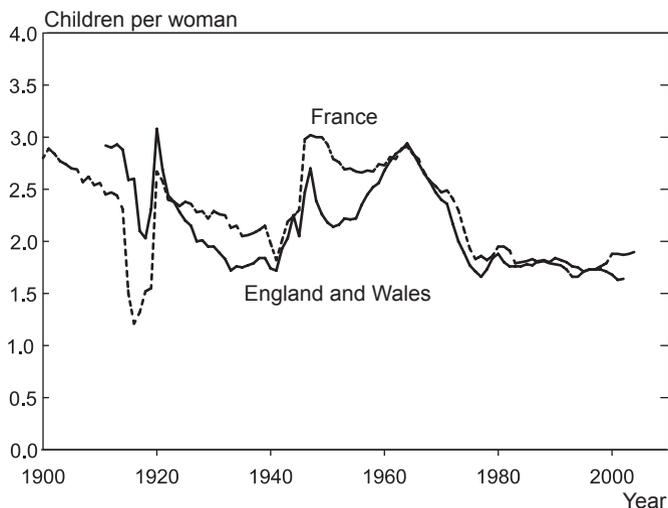


Fig. 2.1 Total fertility rates in France and in England and Wales. (Source: INED database, www.ined.fr/fr/pop_chiffres/pays_developpes/conjoncture/un_indicateur/)

In 1946 alone, the total fertility rate in France rose from 2.3 to 2.98 children, representing a 0.7-point increase, while across the Channel, the rise was from 2.05 to 2.47 children, representing a 0.4 gain (Fig. 2.1).¹

In actual fact, this rapid surge in fertility was not as steep as the one that had taken place after World War I (there was a 1.12-point increase in France between 1919 and 1920). It is therefore not so much the *intensity* of the increase in fertility that is remarkable as its *duration*—nearly 30 years.

The exceptional nature of the baby boom is thrown into particularly sharp relief when it is set against a longer demographic timeline, which shows a long and gradual decline in fertility on both sides of the Channel, starting in the nineteenth century. It is important to point out, however, that although the two countries now share very similar populations of around 60 million, their demographic histories pursued markedly different courses across the previous two centuries. Whereas England and Wales followed the classic schema of demographic transition², whereby a reduction in mortality from 1750 onwards was followed some considerable time later by a reduction in fertility, France started to see its fertility dwindle just a few years after mortality had started to fall, in the early nineteenth century (Vallin and Caselli 1999). This heralded the start of a century-long process of slow and steady decline at an annual rate of 6%, with just two *blips*: catch-up births following the Napo-

¹ Depending on the available data, we compare France with either England and Wales, Great Britain or the United Kingdom. Although the INED databank contains demographic series for France stretching back to 1900, similar data are only available for England and Wales, as total fertility rates were only recorded for the United Kingdom from 1960 onwards. Great Britain is made up of England, Wales and Scotland. When Northern Ireland is added, it becomes the United Kingdom.

² Shift in a population from a traditional demographic regime marked by high fertility and mortality to a modern demographic regime in which fertility and mortality are low. Source: <http://www.ined.fr/en/lexicon/>.

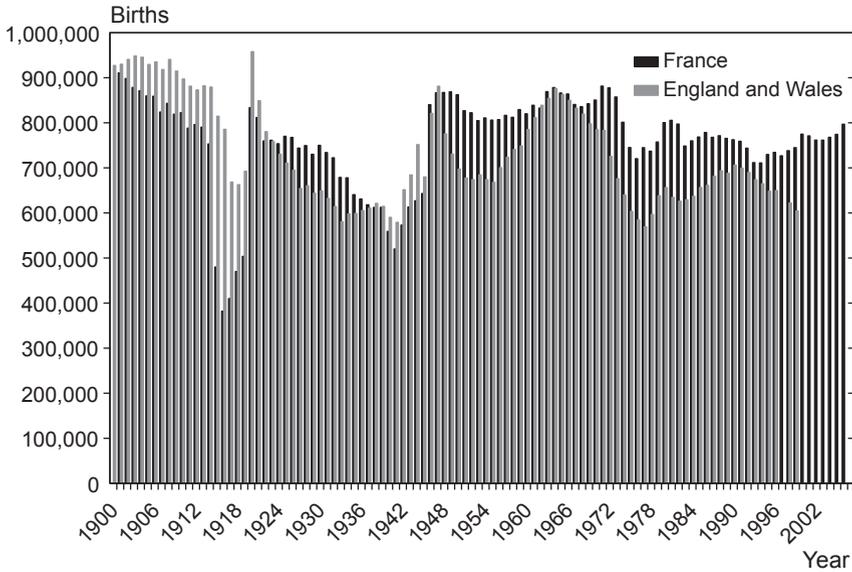


Fig. 2.2 Number of live births in France and in England and Wales. (Source: INED database www.ined.fr/fr/pop_chiffres/pays_developpes/conjoncture/un_indicateur/)

leonic Wars and the 20-year period of 1860–1880. From a demographic point of view, therefore, nineteenth-century France was characterised by voluntary infertility across all layers of population (Armengaud 1966). In England, by contrast, there was no real fall in fertility before 1880, but when it came, it was quite unprecedented in English history, according to David Coleman and John Salt (1992).

The pace of decline quickened with the advent of the Great War, but only in France, where the total fertility rate fell from 2.5 children in 1910 to 1.21 in 1916 (the figure for this year was 2.6 in England and Wales). As we have seen, the end of the conflict saw a sharp rise in fertility, with figures of 2.6 in France and 3.08 across the Channel for 1920, compared with 1.55 and 2.31 for 1919. However, this was very much the product of circumstance, as couples wed in 1919 and 1920 had their first children (Desplanques 1988b). After this brief flurry of activity, rates in both countries fell dramatically, plumbing the depths in the 1930s—a decade marked by Depression and attendant mass unemployment and poverty³ (2.05 children in France and 1.75 in England and Wales in 1935).

If we focus purely on the number of live births—and it is this statistic that defines the 1946–1973 baby boom in France—although there had been a substantial increase in the wake of World War I, both in France and Britain (up by 300,000 between 1919 and 1920; see Fig. 2.2), it was to prove short-lived, and the number

³ In France, couples did not appear to share the concerns voiced since the early nineteenth century about falling birth rates (Desplanques 1988b). Although many authors, including Bertillon, Leroy Beaulieu and Targe, expressed their alarm, propounding populationist-inspired theories (see Béjin 1988), their appeals for women to engage in patriotic procreation fell on deaf ears.

of births declined rapidly from 1923 onwards. It remained at extremely low levels throughout the 1930s, especially in Britain, such that “never, in peacetime, had cradles been so empty” (Desplanques 1988b, p. 291).

The surges in birth rates that occurred in 1920 and 1946 had quite different causes. Thus, while it was the “abundance of firstborns that accounted for the 1920–1921 recovery” (Desplanques 1988b, p. 291) in French birth statistics, the “extra” fertility in 1946 stemmed above all from the arrival of second or third children, as couples were reunited. The following year, there was also an increase in firstborns, produced by couples who had sealed the knot after the Liberation. Then came the second children, with figures peaking in 1949. This first peak of birth rates was specific to France (Desplanques 1988a). As a result, while the total fertility rate for England and Wales in 1947 was 2.7—similar to the rate in Switzerland and the Netherlands—it was substantially lower than the figure for France (3.02), and when the trough of the wave came in 1951, it dropped to just 2.14 children per woman. The second peak, when it came in 1965, was common to nearly all Western nations, and this time round, British women proved just as fertile as their French sisters, as shown in Fig. 2.1. To sum up, an extremely strong early recovery in France resulted in a rate of three children per woman from 1947 onwards. This figure dropped to just 2.6 children in 1956, but then started to climb again, returning to its postwar heights in 1964. Although the peak in Britain was not obtained until the 1960s, the birth rate rose more steeply during the 1950s, catching up with the French one (2.94) in 1964. Rates in both countries then fell, dipping below the two children per woman mark in 1973 in England and Wales and in 1975 in France. We can therefore identify two distinct increases in the total fertility rate reflected in two separate waves of different intensities, one in 1946–1947, the other in 1964. While the first was a mere blip on the screen, the second represented a massive reversal, thus dividing the baby boom period into two parts: the immediate postwar years and the mid-1960s.

Despite its name, the baby boom was not just about lots of babies being born. It was also—and above all—about lots of babies not dying. When the annual number of births rose above the 800,000 mark in 1946, it was certainly not the first time this had happened in the demographic history of the two countries. It was in 1901 that the highest figure (910,000) was recorded in the twentieth century for both France and Britain, contrasting starkly with the number of births in 1936–1938 (Fig. 2.2). What was different about the postwar rise was that babies born after 1946 were far more likely to survive than those born in 1900 had been⁴. According to Guy Desplanques (1988a), nearly one infant in seven died before its first birthday at the beginning of the twentieth century, but by 1950, this figure had fallen to 1 in 20. To gain a clearer idea of what this statistic actually meant, there were more than 130,000 deaths in England for 881,000 live births in 1911. In 1947, this figure had dropped to 41,000 deaths for exactly the same number of births (Fig. 2.3). Early mortality also has a major impact on completed cohort fertility, in that some female children may fail

⁴ 1945 was a catastrophic year, with one French child in nine dying before the age of 12 months (Desplanques 1988a).

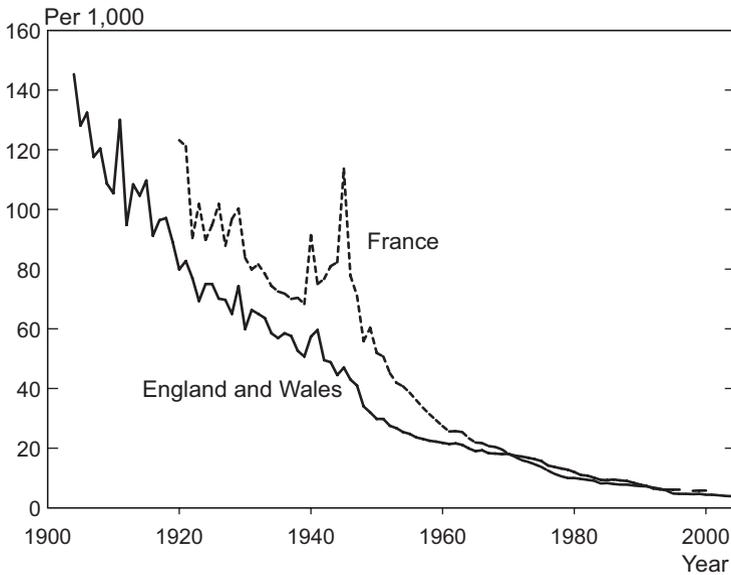


Fig. 2.3 Infant mortality rates in France and in England and Wales, 1900–2005. (Source: INED database www.ined.fr/fr/pop_chiffres/pays_developpes/conjoncture/un_indicateur/)

to reach the age of procreation, and some women may die before they have reached the end of their fertile life. For example, 38% of girls born in France in 1900 died before they reached the age of 28, compared with just 4% of those born in 1960, resulting in a clear impact on net lifetime fertility (Daguet 2002a)⁵.

It was therefore the combination of these two factors, that is, an increase in fertility and a decrease in infant mortality, that resulted in the baby boom. Between 1945 and 1946, 200,000 extra children were born in France and 140,000 in Britain—children who had a far better life expectancy than those born at the beginning of the twentieth century.

2.1.2 *Why Did the Baby Boom Happen?*

When set against the historical perspective of a century-long decline in the birth rate, the baby boom seems particularly striking. One remarkable feature is its longevity, as opposed to its intensity. The other is that it began right in the middle of World War II.

⁵ This author highlights the impact of early mortality on lifetime fertility. The 1900 and 1954 generations had the same lifetime fertility (i.e., 2.12 children per woman), but their net lifetime fertility, which takes account of women who die before they reach their reproductive age, was just 1.52 children for the 1900 generation, compared with 2.02 for the 1954 generation.

2.1.2.1 The Recovery of the Birth Rate in 1942

The application of a method devised by Jean Bourgeois-Pichat for accurately measuring changes in fertility in France led to what Alfred Sauvy (1978) was to describe as a revolutionary conclusion: “Not only did fertility start to recover in 1939, but it grew strongly from 1941 onwards, increasing by 37% in 1943 alone” (p. 155). His conclusion could just as easily apply to Britain, begging the question of why fertility started to climb in 1942, when war was still raging⁶. Fertility reached its nadir in 1940–1941, a period when life was particularly difficult, with severe shortages of food and consumer goods. In France, ration books for bread, sugar and pasta were introduced in September 1940, and extended to all consumer goods in 1941, the number of coupons they contained determined by the age of their holders. As Sauvy (1978) recalls, “the amount of ordinary rations that people could buy with their coupons represented approximately half their quantitative needs and far less for noble foods” (p. 164). To make up for these shortages, city-dwellers were sent so-called *family packages* by their country cousins, and the black market flourished. Even so, according to Jean-François Muracciole (2002), “during the war, the majority of French people devoted most of their time and energy to gleaning enough to feed themselves and their families” (p. 244).

Restrictions were also very tight in Britain, owing to the merciless U-boat attacks on Atlantic convoys that lasted at least until 1943 (Muracciole 2002). Food was rationed, as was clothing. However, despite such austere economic conditions, and high levels of financial uncertainty (especially for women whose husbands were PoWs or, in the case of French men, forced to work in Germany), fertility started to recover on both sides of the Channel in 1942. Two factors are generally put forward: the economy and pro-family policy. Sauvy (1978), for one, cites the fact that unemployment had all but disappeared in France by 1941. In England, too, there was full employment from 1940 onwards, bringing about what François Bédarida (1990) has called “a fundamental shift in the life of the working classes”, which still bore the scars of the 1930s Depression. It is also important to remember that the Second World War mobilized far fewer men than the First had done, and that men started to return from the Front in 1940 (Muracciole 2002). In France, enlisted men went home after the Armistice between France and Germany in 1940, and the German-occupied country then remained largely free of conflict until the Liberation. The same situation prevailed in Britain, as David Coleman and John Salt point out:

British armies were expelled from Europe for four years. This may be one reason why fertility recovered somewhat after its initial wartime decline. (Coleman and Salt 1992, p. 17)

For many researchers, however, the recovery in French fertility in 1942 was actually prompted by a pro-family policy that had first come to the fore in the late 1930s. Jean-Claude Chesnais (1988), in particular, underscores the impact of pro-natalist measures dating back to 1938–1939 that included the generalization of family allowances and the introduction of a non-working mother’s allowance, as well as

⁶ A similar recovery in birth numbers took place in every country in Western Europe.

the establishment of a High Committee for Population chaired by Adolphe Landry. In 1938, there had been “fewer cradles than graves” (Sauvy 1988, p. 149), with 612,000 births for 647,000 deaths, meaning that future generations were shrinking. This situation prompted increasing state intervention in people’s private lives, in a bid to reverse the trend, resulting in the Family Code of July 1939, followed by the creation of the Ministry for the Family in 1940, led by father-of-seven Georges Pernot. The year 1941 saw a 30% rise in family allowance for families with three or more children, and the allowance for stay-at-home mothers was generalized, such that it was tantamount to a single living wage, and became the “keystone of Vichy policy” (Muracciole 2002, p. 143).

It is, however, one thing to acknowledge a plausible link between the recovery of fertility and the pro-family policy implemented in France in the late 1930s and quite another to assert that this was the one and only factor, especially since birth rates also increased in other European countries. Indeed, Jean-François Muracciole (2002) and Guy Desplanques (1988a) have demonstrated that there is no single explanation, be it psychological (e.g. the survival instinct in times of war) or political (e.g. the impact of government policies). The widespread assumption is that France witnessed a resurrection of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s family model, centred on the natural bond between mother and child, where the woman is first and foremost wife and mother, and must therefore renounce all ideas of paid employment (Rousseau 1762). This model corresponds to the nuclear family described and analysed by Talcott Parsons (1955), where gender roles and functions are clearly delineated, the man being the main breadwinner and the women the *homemaker*. The father thus has an instrumental role and the mother an expressive one, and the status of the family is defined by the man’s occupational status. However, the reality in 1942 was somewhat different, as the number of births outside wedlock increased, and despite legislation restricting the employment of married women⁷, women with absent husbands suffered such financial and economic hardship that they simply had no choice but to go out to work. In England, women were actually encouraged to find jobs, as part of the war effort. In 1941, single women under 30 were called up to work in industry or in the services, and in 1943 this measure was extended to all single women up to the age of 50. Married women under 40 had to register for work in factories (where they came to represent 40% of the workforce). A preoccupation with families comes through very clearly in the *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services* of 1942, more famously known as the Beveridge Report, which recommended a national system of social security and family allowances (Leese 2006).

⁷ On 11 October 1940, the Vichy Government banned the employment of married women by government departments and local councils, and forced women over 50 to retire.

2.1.2.2 Why Did the Baby Boom Last So Long?

The baby boom observed in so many industrialised countries, with France and Britain dominating the rest in Western Europe, cannot be ascribed solely to postponed ‘catch-up’ births, otherwise it would not have continued once this goal had been achieved. Although it is difficult to identify the mechanisms and main protagonists that underpinned the baby boom, there are several closely correlated factors. Generally speaking, the reasons advanced to explain the high numbers after 1946 are the same as those linked to the initial recovery in the birth rate, namely couples being reunited, low unemployment and pro-family policies. Regarding the latter, a number of far-reaching measures affecting families and the demographic situation were introduced from 1945 onwards. In France, shortly after war had ended, General de Gaulle called on women to produce “12 million bouncing babies for France in 10 years” (Norvez 1990), while in Britain, the 1949 *Report of the Royal Commission on Population* stated that the ideal family consisted of three or four children (Leese 2006, p. 29). In France, after the “calamity of 1945” (Norvez 1990, p. 54)—a year that proved particularly deadly for infants, owing to poor milk supplies and a lack of heating—, the priority was to improve the infant population both quantitatively and qualitatively. A particular target was to reduce infant mortality, which was one of the missions of the new mother and child welfare system (Protection Maternelle et Infantile, PMI) established in 1945. Demographers were to have a powerful voice, not least Alfred Sauvy, who was a strong proponent of pro-family and sociodemographic policies (Norvez 1990)⁸. In Britain, the postwar years also saw the introduction of genuinely pro-family policies (Family Allowances Act in 1945, *Report of the Royal Commission on Population* in 1949, and the extension of family allowances), all of which put women centre stage. They were to become important players in society, the object of every attention, be it from doctors⁹, psychologists or the media. In France, even if their entitlement was based on their husbands’ rights, family allowance was paid directly to the baby boomers’ mothers in the form of postal orders from 1945 onwards. This meant that they had their own budgets and became fully-fledged economic agents within the market, as highlighted by the Women’s Civic and Social Union (UFCS), a social Catholic organization, and the National Union of Family Associations (UNAF). This change did not go unnoticed, and women soon became the target of numerous magazines and consumer products. In the early years at least (as we will see in Chap. 4), women proved to be the main beneficiaries of the consumer society, in that they were freed from the most arduous and repetitive household chores by new household appliances, such as the SEB pressure cooker and above all the washing machine (“those long and tiring laundry days are now a thing of the past”¹⁰). Unsurprisingly, many researchers in France credit the pro-family policy that emerged in the 1930s and gathered strength in the

⁸ See in particular Chap. 3, entitled “*La situation à la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale*”.

⁹ “The baby boom definitively brought the child out of the circle of private life” (Knibiehler 1977).

¹⁰ Words uttered in July 1950 by a radio commentator vaunting the merits of Hoover washing machines, cited by Leese (2006, p. 45).

postwar years with driving the baby boom. Although some would beg to differ, pointing out that similar rises in birth rates occurred in countries with fewer pronatalist measures, it is certainly true that the increase in figures was less pronounced in Britain, where the label *baby boom* is usually reserved for the fertility peak of the 1960s, the initial recovery being viewed primarily as a catch-up process.

As in 1920, children represented a source of immense hope, a reason to live and a means of healing the wounds of war. Unlike the interwar period, however, far from fading, this belief in the future persisted and even grew as the years went by. One reason for this is that, in contrast to the aftermath of the Great War, both victors and vanquished were helped to restart their economies after 1945. As Jean Mathieux and Gérard Vincent explain:

Liberal economists in Europe and the United States, Marxist economists in the USSR, businessmen and statesmen all agreed that the war would be followed by a worldwide crisis of far greater depth and severity than the one that occurred in 1920–21 in the wake of World War I. (Mathieux and Vincent 1973, p. 63)

The implementation of the Marshall Plan (1947–1951), with US \$ 12.4 billion in loans and grants, was a reflection of the determination to avoid a new recession. It brought huge benefits to Allied nations and former Axis powers alike, and the Americans effectively footed most of the bill for France's first capital investment and modernisation plan. Thanks to this financial assistance, together with a recovery in production, increased productivity and an improvement in public finances, the inevitable period of high postwar inflation only lasted until early 1950. The financial situation also improved in Britain, which was soon able to turn down further Marshall Plan grants. The economic recovery soon made itself felt in a fall in unemployment, and the small size of their cohort meant that the baby boomers' parents had no trouble entering the labour market, thus proving Easterlin's theory¹¹ about the cycle of fertility—at least for this period. We can therefore draw a link between economic recovery, the hope it generated and fertility. We should not forget “the high number of unwanted births, to which we can add the equally high number of births that were desired but which occurred rather earlier than couples would have wished” (Leridon 1987). Nevertheless, as Henri Leridon states:

It was not just the absence of effective family planning methods that made such a situation possible, but also a general context in which that “extra” child was not altogether one too many. (Leridon 1987, p. 280)

These newborns were thus assured of a warm reception, for children's place in society had radically changed. In addition to the desire to catch up with postponed childbearing and the pro-friendly policy, there was a more psychological factor, according to Christine Bard, who claims that government policies “cannot fully

¹¹ Richard Easterlin noticed that American fertility occurred in cycles of expansion and retraction, with variations in fertility apparently linked to how easily young people were able to enter the job market. He argued that because the members of a small cohort find work more easily and enjoy better living standards, their fertility is higher. Twenty years down the line, the cohort is correspondingly larger, and its members therefore have greater difficulty entering the employment market, resulting in lower fertility (Easterlin 1974).

explain the baby boom, although psychological motivations are hard to pin down. The hopes that parents placed in their offspring to rebuild postwar society may well have played a role. The economic prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s doubtless created a climate of confidence, where upward social mobility became a possibility [...]” (Bard 2001, p. 280).

Young households in particular now exuded an air of confidence and “happiness was in the cradle” (Sirinelli 2003, p. 46). Children could be brought into the world without the fear of losing them because of high infant mortality or war looming on the horizon. The availability of new household appliances meant that it was henceforth possible to bring several children up without being worn down by household chores. Couples could relax in front of the television, go on holiday, and drive (instead of walking everywhere) in their newly purchased 2CV. Annie Ernaux describes this extraordinary period in her novel *Les Années*:

The restrictions were over and there was a stream of novelties, spread out just enough for us to greet each one with the same rapturous astonishment... These extraordinary things came out of nowhere, just like in a fairytale. There was something for everyone: ballpoint pens, shampoo refill pouches, Bulgomme and Gerflex, Tampax and depilatory creams, Gilac plastic, Tergal, strip lighting, hazelnut milk chocolate, VéloSoleX mopeds and chlorophyll toothpaste... We were bowled over by these inventions that put an end to centuries and centuries of gestures and efforts... (Ernaux 2008, p. 42)

Nothing could dent the unshakeable faith in the future, for each new day was better than the day before, and women found that they had a genuine role to play in improving everyday existence.

This optimism can seem surprising, given the unsatisfactory living conditions that ordinary people had to put up with, not least postwar rationing and poor housing (of which more later). In 1946, when the baby boom first started, everyday life was still extremely tough. Postwar disillusionment had also set in and would last for a decade. Food shortages were still a fact of life and rationing continued in France until February 1949. It took the French four and a half years to return to their prewar standard of living. As Sauvy (1978) points out, the supply system that had been so long in the planning failed to work properly. As late as 1954, the government of Pierre Mendès France had to introduce free school milk to make up for food shortages in French households. This deprivation must have been particularly hard for the French to bear, given that most of them had assumed that the Liberation would put an end to their problems and they would be able to enjoy the consumer goods they had discovered when the GIs landed in Normandy. The shortages that characterised the postwar years stemmed from the catastrophic situation in which both France and Britain (Kynaston 2007) found themselves. Demographically, France had lost nearly 600,000 men and women, and Britain more than 400,000. In both countries, agricultural production had been hit hard and industrial production harder still. The transport infrastructure had been damaged, and a proportion of the housing stock destroyed. The French and British governments embarked on extremely ambitious reconstruction programmes involving in-depth economic (nationalisation of energy companies, airlines and banks) and social (creation of the social security system in France in 1945) reforms. Some of the key societal reforms had



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