

# Foreword

The post-war baby boom phenomenon is still a source of enigma today, even for demographers. Do baby boomers really represent a homogeneous and specific generation? To what extent have they contributed to the drastic family transformations of the last five decades? Do they bear some responsibility for the current social problems regularly raised by politicians and the media, such as youth delinquency and violence, negative impacts of divorce, weakening of social links, decline of authority and respect, loss of references, etc.?

Baby boomers arouse questions and ambivalence. On the one hand, the fertility recovery which occurred suddenly after the Second World War in most industrialized countries was received as a wonderful promise for hope in the future and even in some countries, like France, as a miracle after a long period of low fertility and strong pro-birth movements and policies; but on the other hand, this baby boom was progressively understood as a source of small revolutions and new claims in the sphere of private life, contributing to dismantling the previous social order and centrally the male breadwinner gender contract. Ambivalence between innovation and promises of gender equality, on the one side, and individualism and fear of egoism, on the other. Nowadays, baby boomers are looked through the lens of a new collective “problem”: the baby boom.

Catherine Bonvalet, Céline Clément and Jim Ogg’s book is the perfect tool to understand this process of change in private life. When following the succession of generations, that is to say, historical and sociological generations (people born at the same period, who have witnessed the same events at the same age), but also generations as we consider them in kinship (people situated between ascendants and descendants), one can understand concretely what these changes mean as an experience for the actors. The authors propose from the outset a distinction in this large generation between a first wave, born between 1946 and 1954 and a second one, born between 1955 and 1973. The famous year 1968 represents a turning point for this distinction as it is certainly different to experience this historical event at 13 or 14 years old or between 18 and 22. But the main argument refers to the gap in terms of socialization and living conditions: the first wave experienced the postwar frugality, scarcity, rationing and resourcefulness, whilst the second grew up in a context of economic growth and prosperity and enjoyed greater social mobility and a much better quality of life during the “Thirty golden years”.

Among its numerous qualities, this book gives us a complete state of the art of academic discussion concerning the baby boom, its understanding from a demographic but also sociological point of view. It presents the main relevant results of large national and international databases, underlines the crucial role of the gender variable to understand social changes, so much it is true that women were frequently the main actors of the process of transformation during these decades. It also provides a very useful comparative counterpoint when looking at the differences between France and the United Kingdom. However, the book does not offer a systematic comparison between these two countries, but more a qualitative and in-depth study of the cultural differences, since many very close economic and sociological indicators could let us expect more similarities.

But the main contribution of this book is certainly the angle, the perspective put forward by the authors, which is also a framework following the life cycle of the first baby boomer wave: childhood, adolescence, family foundation, professional trajectory with the challenge of work-family balance and finally the current phase of caring tasks for elderly parents. Following this group's trajectory, the reader has access to a quasi-complete life cycle.

The first section, dedicated to the baby boomers' childhood, is a wonderful demonstration of the baby boom's complexity and enigma. The main arguments to explain this phenomenon generally refer either to macroeconomic performance (reduction of unemployment from 1941 onwards relayed by the Marshall Plan after 1947, which gave work opportunities to the parents of baby boomers) or to the role of French family policy to support fertility since 1938. But the authors argue that it is more useful to look back towards the two previous generations of mothers and grand-mothers to understand the conditions and possibilities of this demographic boom.

This is one of the major lessons of this essay: to understand to what extent a generation is the result of the previous ones. Contrary to a mainstream understanding, it is less a question of social reproduction, and more of change. Thus, grand-mothers of the baby boomers (generation 1880–1910) who formed their families during the inter-war period after the trauma of the “Grande Guerre”, adopted a Malthusian position, refusing the burden of many births, a position that the authors qualify as “a child's refusal”. The numbers are very clear indeed: the fertility rate fell from 6 children per women in 1870 to 2.3 in 1915. The gap is huge with the profile of their daughters, mothers of the baby boom, who also accepted the male-breadwinner gender contract, meaning a strict division of labour, with men as providers of goods and women as housewives and care-workers available for their children. Everything suggests that the challenge for each generation of women was not to suffer the fate of their mothers. And the process continues afterwards for the daughters of baby boom mothers whose challenge was to obtain birth control, access to contraception, abortion and women's rights.

To explain the new attitude of the baby boomers' mothers, the authors insist for example on the role of youth movements which have clearly contributed to this “voluntary domestic home confinement”. But they underline mainly a double-bind: on one side, wonderful promises of development in a context of economic growth,

overcoming housing challenges, improvement of the welfare state, access to a consumer society and, on the other, strong social control and normative pressure in private life and gender roles. The baby boom family reminds us of the US family of *Revolutionary Roads*, Richard Yates' novel that describes finely the mixture of conformity and desire for emancipation, the promises of marriage and family happiness coupled with domestic confinement, which produce double-bind and chaos.

With this global angle, the authors take us back into the post 1968 revolution atmosphere, with its main issues and rhetoric: anti-institutionalism, anti-psychiatry, anti-conformity, anti-family, social struggles and political radicalization. They also sum up the (new and resounding) revolution imposed by baby boomers to the family, with all its indicators: fertility and marriage rate decline, increase of cohabitation, divorce and births out of wedlock, etc. But the main point in this process of change is undoubtedly the gender issue. As indeed, the real driver of these changes is the access of a generation of women to wages and "salarial", which means at the same time greater autonomy, the potential emancipation from marriage dependency and an individual protection through labour law. The model of the active mother supplanted that of the housewife, as the dual-earner family replaced the male-breadwinner.

Nevertheless, it has to be said that first, this driver is probably not only the result of new feminist claims but also the impact of the "Great transformation"—to use Polanyi's terms—which has to do with the development of the service sector of economy and feminization of the workforce; and second, that the reality is far from its promise as this individualization strengthened gendered and social inequalities. New social risks and social problems have emerged through this process which shifts the entire process of Welfare building: problems of work/family balance, lone parent's and child's poverty, economic dependence and precariousness of youth, growing demands and needs of care for the elderly. After offering a new set of values for the global society, like autonomy, choice, self-determination, freedom, here is part of the main baby boomers' legacy for the next generation. Terrific challenges, indeed.

Rennes  
April 2014

Claude Martin,  
sociologist, research professor at the CNRS



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-08544-9>

Renewing the Family: A History of the Baby Boomers

Bonvalet, C.; Clément, C.; Ogg, J.

2015, XIV, 268 p. 11 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-08544-9