

# The Third Age and the Baby Boomers

## Two Approaches to the Social Structuring of Later Life

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### Abstract

This paper outlines two contrasting positions in interpreting contemporary change in later life. These are summarily represented by a cohort approach that focuses upon the baby boomers and a generational approach that focuses upon the third age. We argue that understanding the role of the sixties' cultural revolution for the emergence of the third age offers a broader conceptual understanding of the transformation of later life than that provided by the more restrictive and restricting framework of a baby boom cohort. That many people, particularly in the USA, self identify with the term 'baby boomer' reflects not so much the power of cohorts as structuring influences on the 'conscience collective' as the role of the market and the media in shaping their social identities.

Keywords: Cohort, Generation, Midlife

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## Introduction

With the notable exception of gerontology, the horizontal divisions within society such as cohort, age group and generation have had considerably less attention paid to them than the vertical divisions of class, gender and ethnicity. Arguably, the insights from social gerontology concerning the significance of age cohort and generation are becoming more important to the wider understanding of society. Part of this change in perspective is the 'cultural turn' that has influenced a wide range of disciplines in the behavioural, human and social sciences (Chaney 1994; Denning 2004; Jameson 1991; Ray and Sayer 1999). Key to the idea of the cultural turn is the perceived inadequacy of structurally determining explanations of social processes that are based upon class or economic interest in contrast to those emphasising diversity, differentiation and distinction. The emergence of age-based sub-cultures represents one aspect of this more general phenomenon. The purpose of the present paper is to explore the contemporary organisation and experience of later life drawing upon two contrasting approaches to studying the horizontal divisions in society, namely that of cohort and that of generation.

Peter Laslett's (1989) book, *A Fresh Map of Life*, is seminal in identifying "the third age" as a key development in the transformation of later life in contemporary society. By popularising the idea that a new stage of life was emerging after retirement, in post-war Western society, Laslett sought to integrate history and demography with individual development to define what he saw as a "new" personal and collective identity. This identity stood in direct contrast to the traditional social categorisation of later life as "old age". In the process, however, Laslett confounded individual development, cohort and period, making the third age seem a phenomenon of personal achievement as much as social transformation. Each of these ingredients is problematic. First, as Thane has pointed out, delineating the various stages of life has a long history and the distinction between a "green" old age and a "frail" old age goes back at least to medieval times (Thane 2003). Secondly, Laslett's emphasis upon demographic indicators leads him to seek to "date" the emergence of the third age at the point when the majority of a particular birth cohort can expect

to reach the age of seventy (Laslett 1989). This “fact” defines the historical period that determines the emergence of a third age. Taken together, this amalgam of individual development, history and demography, though superficially seductive, fails to provide a convincing analysis of the cultural and social transformation of later life that situates it more firmly within post-war consumer culture. This failure of social and cultural analysis leads Laslett to become preoccupied with the moral imperative for older people to become “true” third agers (Laslett 1989).

Whilst recognising the importance of Laslett’s work in highlighting change within later life, we have argued that a more adequate analysis of the third age is required (Gilleard and Higgs 2002). In this paper we wish to contrast two alternative perspectives: a *cohort based approach* to the third age that is framed around the ageing of a “baby boomer” cohort with a *generational approach* that is concerned with the evolution of “mass consumer culture” across the life course. Common to both approaches is a concern with historical change in the experience of later life. What differentiates them is the former’s focus upon a distinct cohort identity (i.e. as a baby boomer) as against the latter’s focus upon generational lifestyle (i.e. as participants in the third age). Before addressing these differences, we need to look more closely at the specific period in question, namely the decades after the 1950s, a time which Laslett suggests saw the first emergence of the third age (Laslett 1989). This period is important not just for social gerontologists but for social science as a whole as it is the crux of debates over the transformation of modernity itself (Beck et al. 2003; Giddens 1990; Jameson 1991; Lash and Urry 1987).

### Periodising the “Sixties”

Birth cohort and generational approaches share a common interest in periodisation, particularly the significance of the decades after the Second World War, in transforming the experiences of adulthood during and after working life. Key elements in those changes are the rise in affluence and the concomitant expansion of consumption and communication; the growth of occupational and educational opportunities for women; the shift from manufacturing to service industry; transformations in urban and rural communities; the rise in secularism; the expan-

sion of leisure and entertainment; and the diversification of sources of income sustaining later life (Gallie 2000; Hakim 2000; Ransome 2005; Sandbrook 2005; 2006).

Locating a starting point for these changes raises a number of problems. Different countries had different starting points and trajectories, but throughout the Western World the 1960s marked a pivotal moment, crystallised by the events of 1968, from the “summer of love” to student rebellion to political crisis and military defeat (Kurlansky 2005; Marwick 1998; Sandbrook 2006). Parallel with the cultural revolution of that decade was an unparalleled period of economic growth, relatively full employment and expanding opportunities for domestic expenditure (Atkinson 2000; Ransome 2005; Rosen 2003; Therborn 1995). Such affluence fostered and supported increasing social differentiation and the growth of subcultures based on “different lifestyles, ways of purchasing” (Denning 2004). Those most exposed to the challenge of affluence were youth, a term that extended from the mid-teens up to the mid-twenties, constituted by those born in the 1940s and early 1950s (Marwick 1998).

Accompanying these changes in the material circumstances of society were changes in social attitude. Central to the growth of subculture was a privileging of agency (Jenks 2005) and ideas of “liberation” (Denning 2004). Choice, autonomy, and self-expression were valorised along with a growth in everyday hedonism. As the British poet Philip Larkin noted somewhat wryly, sex emerged as a major public good in the 1960s, somewhere between the Lady Chatterley trial and the Beatles first LP. Expanding leisure meant expanding pleasure. It was no longer the case of shocking the bourgeoisie – the target had shifted to shocking the older generation (Mackay 1997). If the inter-war years had been a time when class based revolutions seemed imminent, the 1960s were a time when a generational revolution appeared to be in the offing. Generational rather than class or gender based differences became more salient and the earlier cultural divisions of class and gender became less determining. Elvis Presley, James Dean and Marlon Brando presented themselves as role model “rebels” to working class and middle class kids alike (Cross 2000). In Britain there was a widespread belief conveyed by the media that a new class was emerging, defined by different parameters based upon outlook, style and, particularly, youth (Sandbrook 2006).

The "revolution" on the streets, in the clubs and coffee bars, in the dance halls and on the college campuses was a revolt as much against the restrictions associated with the standards and styles of life of an older generation as it was against the oppression of classes or nations. It was a disdain and a dislike for all those who had maintained and managed existing society, not just its ruling elites (Judt 2007). The cultural divide that members of this post-Second World War cohort were fashioning was intended quite deliberately to exclude the preceding generation. Where once they had served as an apprenticeship for lifelong labour, the teenage years became a training ground for lifestyle consumption. As "youth culture" was shaped by the market, youth in turn created new spaces in which the market could expand and in the process counter culture became consumer culture (Binkley 2007; Heath and Potter 2005).

### The Trajectory of a Generation

If youth acquired a new, crisis laden identity during the fifties and sixties, the later loss of "youth" facing those approaching middle age in the 1980s led to new concerns with the dilemmas of midlife and the need to resist the encroachments of age (Grossberg 1992). The development of lifestyle that had emerged out of the post-war youth subcultures continued into midlife. For those who had grown up in the youth privileging mass culture of the "long" sixties, who had been told that people over thirty had nothing to say that was worth listening to, who had listened eagerly to the once young Roger Daltrey singing "I hope I die before I get old", middlebence presented a serious dilemma. The issue was not so much about losing the attributes of youth as an aversion to becoming what had earlier been resisted i.e. old.

The resolution to this potential loss of identity was expressed by denying or actively resisting ageing, or better still doing both. In a slightly different formulation, Christopher Lasch spoke of the "culture of narcissism" founded by the youth culture of the sixties that, in his view, fostered "the denial" and "dread of age" that "originates not in a cult of youth but in a cult of the self" (Lasch 1980). The new individualism of the sixties set the scene for a new popular, self-help literature focused upon a youth-oriented middle age, offering reassurance to this new cohort of

ageing youths that, providing certain guidelines are followed, middle age can be as exciting and challenging as youth. Middle age could become a rejuvenating experience.

By the 1980s, lifestyle had become a dominant theme within US society, raising questions about what it is to be "an adult" in a world where "youthful" rebellion had become institutionalised as an unending process of individualisation and personal differentiation (Grossberg 1992). Citizen consumers seemed to exist in infinitely divisible groupings, holding in common the desire to improve their lives, but lacking, and seeming not desiring any shared ideal of what such improvements should look like. Earlier counter-cultural movements from the 1960s and 1970s had become incorporated and effectively "commodified" into mainstream consumer culture (Lau 2000). Social change in the status of women, black and Hispanic Americans, gay men and women and other minority groups resulted in expanding opportunities and widening life choices but shorn of the political edge that they possessed when they emerged in the 1960s (Halter 2000; Michaels 2005). Continuing market segmentation saw new life stage, lifestyle opportunities emerging, offering a proliferation of consumer niches for a widening age range of citizen-participants united through a desire to achieve a continuing sense of personal distinction.

The submergence of cultural distinctions based on social class and the rise of "consumption cleavages" based upon "life stage" accelerated during the 1980s. Although structured by income, education, ethnicity and gender, a mature market started to reconstruct middle age. A growing number of self help books and an expanding array of anti-ageing products, nutraceuticals and cosmeceuticals "designed" to ward off the signs of old age began appearing in bookshops, healthfood stores and pharmacies (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). Life stage emerged as an increasingly significant source of market segmentation at the time when the participants of post war youth culture were reaching midlife and some members of its advance vanguard already retiring. Making visible this "invisible consumer market", the market was starting to target the over forties/over fifties with a variety of lifestyle products that promised "looking and feeling healthier happier and more beautiful than ever before" (quotation from the September 1982 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, cited by Friedan 1994). Although not without earlier precedents, what was

distinctive about the 1980s marketing of middle age was its presentation of middle age as the start of something new – a new [not old] stage of life, a life “beginning at 40” (*Weekend* magazine article, 5th November 1988 cited in Benson 1997).

From the late-1980s onwards a further twist was added by the introduction of “generational marketing”, epitomised in such books as *Rocking the Ages* (Smith and Clurman 1997), *Boom, Bust & Echo* (Foot 1997) and *The Age Wave* (Dytchwald and Flower 1990). This idea has spread from North America to other developed countries and a number of organisations have been set up to capitalise on this latest phase in the market segmentation of a generation whose adult life has been marked by the restless pursuit of consumption mediated distinction. The maturing of those who had been young in the 1960s has been accompanied by continuing differentiation and the fading of the image of middle age as a time of settled sameness. The rejection of conformity had become not so much a sign of youth as the mindset of a generation that is refusing to conform and grow old.

One consequence is that, by the turn of the twenty first century, old age has lost much of its definition. The terms “later life” and “the third age” have become common currency, even if their meaning is subject to multiple interpretations. The birth cohort at the centre of this change is arguably that made up of people born in the 1940s, who reached adulthood at any point from the late 1950s to the late 1960s. The period during which they have lived through their adult years is certainly distinct, as an era of mass consumption, mass communication and mass culture, in which liberation, lifestyle and leisure have played such important parts. The question that must be raised is whether it is the time of their lives, or the life of their times that is most central to understanding the fragmentation and dissolution of the social category of old age that is now evident. This leads us to the central point of this paper, namely the difference between a cohort and a generation in explaining the emergence and significance of the third age.

## Baby Boomers: Cohort or Generational Identity?

In Britain and the US, baby boomers are framed as a demographic; a particularly large birth cohort whose passage through the second half of the twentieth century is seen as creating a particularly significant cultural wave. What makes this wave iconic is the degree to which the sheer number of "boomers" dwarfs those born either side of it. The habits attitudes and dispositions of this cohort are seen to dominate the cultural sphere because of their numerical supremacy and because they are catering to their own particular interests. What has been remarkable is the extent to which a boomer iconography has taken off since the late 1980s. Whereas the term baby boomer was originally confined to economic and demographic analyses of a particularly large twenty year US birth cohort (e.g. Russell 1982; Light 1988), it has more recently become a lodestone of US society, signifying a new age for age as growing numbers of people are predicted to start retiring in the second decade of the twenty first century (Dytchwald and Flower 1990; Dytchwald 1999).

But despite being talked about more and more by demographers, economists, gerontologists and political scientists in the USA, it is not clear if being a baby boomer is an identity that people outside the USA ascribe to themselves or others their age and what significance should be attached to this type of social identity. Several problems arise when the term is used both as a source of distinction and as a particular social category demarcated by year of birth. In the first place, there is the problem of delineation. As with any cohort, there is an inevitable arbitrariness in determining its boundaries. When those boundaries are based upon relative numbers born in any one year, clearly there will be both temporal and national variations that will result in some countries having quite different groups of people labelled as baby boomers, with some countries having no baby boom cohorts at all (see below).

A self-ascribed baby boomer status clearly has more meaning for North Americans than it does for most Europeans. Whether this meaning is conferred as a creation of the market and the media rather than by the weight of demographics is probably impossible to answer definitively but it seems likely that the appropriation of this term by people working in marketing and the media has played the major role in establishing this identity in Canada and the USA. Given the twenty year span covered by

the term in the USA, baby boomers will include people whose experiences will at any one point in time differ quite substantively – from the young adult watching and reading about the tumultuous events of 1968 to those who were pre-schoolers at the time; or equally the difference, in 2006, between a sixty year old person taking early retirement in Arizona and a forty year old raising a new baby in Arkansas.

Peter Laslett accused Ken Dytchwald, in his book on the ageing of the baby boomers, of “tak[ing] from demography the concept of cohort and ...misusing it in a bizarre fashion” (Laslett 2000). Laslett criticised Dytchwald for his lack of knowledge of demography. Perhaps the point is that while demography is no basis for creating a model of sociology, the incorporation of demographic terminology into popular culture is itself not without interest or significance, and particularly the links that have been established between the cultural creation of a baby boomer identity and ageing.

Rather than seeking, let alone conferring any explanatory power on the term “baby boomers” as a social identity structured by demographics, it is better to explore how the generational schism that set those who were young apart from those who were old in the sixties has been reconfigured. The post-war US baby boom first appeared as a concern of policy makers and economists in the 1970s, for whom it was the numerical size of the cohort that was of primary significance (Bean 1983; Butz and Ward 1979; Easterlin 1968; Sweezy 1971). The transformation of this demographic into a self-inscribed identity was achieved through its elaboration by the market as noted earlier. What links the baby boomers with the youth culture of the 1960s is their appropriation by the market. Where once concerns were expressed about the financial difficulties facing this large birth cohort – in terms of their earnings (Berger 1985; Easterlin Schaeffer and Macunovich 1993; Levy and Michel 1986) and their future retirement income (Levy and Michel 1991; Welch 1979) – by the 1990s, their status had been transformed into that of a particularly favoured group, whose forthcoming retirement would establish a new age for old age (cf. Dytchwald 1999; Owsram 1996). Just as the counter culture of youth became incorporated within the mass consumer society of the 1960s, so in the 1990s, baby boomers have become the motif of a new mature market. It is no longer the weight of their demographic numbers that

marks them out as a significant social structure. Instead, it is their *generational habitus* (Gilleard and Higgs 2005) that is celebrated by the advocates of generational marketing such as Dychtwald (1999), Moschis (1994), Walker Smith and Clurman (1997) and Wallace (1999).

Outside North America less emphasis has been paid to this demographic structure, partly because the post war circumstances of European nations were highly diverse. In Finland, the post war baby boom lasted for about three years (Suokannas 2005; see Karisto this issue); in Eastern Europe, there were few signs of any post war baby boom, rather the opposite, a decline in fertility throughout the 1950s (Therborn 1995); in Italy there had been a steady decline in fertility that only came to a halt in the 1950s (Livi Bacci 1967); while in Germany there was no post war baby boom until the 1960s. In France and in Britain, there were two quite separate booms, the first occurring between 1945 and 1950 and the second between 1960 and 1965 (Chauvel 2005; Evandrou and Falkingham 2000) whilst fertility patterns in Eastern Europe developed in quite divergent directions from those in the West, dropping steadily in the post war decades (Coleman 1993).

It is only relatively recently that the North American preoccupation with the ageing of the baby boomers has been transferred into the discourse of European gerontology. This "Americanisation" of later life mirrors the earlier process of transatlantic cultural transformation that occurred after the Second World War (Kroen 2006; Kuisel 1993). Using the concept of the baby boomers outside its historical and geographical context turns a particular instance into a general phenomenon. The question that arises is whether the idea of the third age as a generational field commits the same over-generalising error.

That demographics are not the primary origin of generational identity can be gleaned from the experience of post First World War America. A generational divide emerged then, but it was largely confined to the middle classes who possessed the discretionary spending power to participate in the new cultures of modernity (Dumenil 1995; Hirshbein 2001). Faced with the mass hardship of the Depression and the drawing together of ranks following America's entry into the Second World War, the issue of a generational division subsided. But the idea had not been destroyed and it soon re-emerged after the Second World War in the

shape of a new social phenomenon – the American teenager. The parents of this new cohort of teenagers had themselves grown up in the inter-war years, at a time when American consumer society was establishing itself. The proto “youth culture” of the 1920s had already touched their lives and the idea of young people choosing their own wardrobe, using make up, fashioning hairstyles and owning motor bikes and motor cars was no longer so surprising or shocking as it once had been.

The post-war teenager affluence was mediated more by their parents’ rising income, than by any increase in teenagers’ own earned income (Hine 2000). Still it was disposable income. Teenagers bought cars, radios, records, and clothes, and spent time hanging out in coffee bars and drug stores, drinking, smoking and listening to music on the newly installed juke boxes that spread across America. Once the grown-ups had seated themselves comfortably in front of their television sets, the owners of commercial radio and the cinema industry soon realised that they would only survive by appealing to this new teenage audience. From this combination of post-war affluence, increasing market segmentation and the unifying experience provided by high school culture, a generational divide was instituted that stretched across ever-wider sections of American society. As this new “youth culture” began to help shape and, in its turn, was shaped by the market, a new social rupture emerged generating an even wider cultural divide. This was the emergence of new social movements that established a new politics around youth, freedom and identity, breaking with the previous politics of class and community that had dominated much of America’s political life throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Denning 2004).

New layers of disaffection and alienation were exposed beneath the veneer of America’s affluent society while an old division within the nation that had been kept under wraps for much of the first half of the century re-emerged with the added vengeance of youth. Race and gender moved to the forefront of American politics; and with these issues there arose new questions of identity (Fraser 1995). After the 1973 oil crisis, many of the reforms of the 1960s were slowed down or halted. Much of the cultural revolution and its identity politics were gradually assimilated within what was now a more variegated, pervasive but passive consumer culture (Cohen 2004; Heath and Potter 2005). Real wages con-

tinued to grow, but more slowly than before, and American confidence in its consumer society began to suffer a series of temporary setbacks. The prospect of maintaining social integration through consumption had been severely challenged. Those excluded from mainstream society were excluded not so much by their inability to consume but by the fact that what they were forced to consume was an America with which they no longer wished to identify (Spigel and Curtin 1997). Sub-cultural styles seemed to be harbingers of new forms of social distinction, creating a vision of a more tolerant, rainbow nation.

But many of the above distinctions were inherently unstable. The "counter cultural" movements of the sixties and early seventies were, as Gary Cross has noted, "premised on the revolutionary potential of youth status... [and] had so little to say to people farther on in life" (Cross 2000). Instead, those moving further along in life developed individualised approaches toward consumption, focusing upon diffuse ideas of "values and lifestyle". The more solid consequences of the cultural revolution of the sixties seemed to be the expansion of consumption, through increasing market segmentation and personal differentiation, marking a transition from "popular" to "mass" culture. Cross cutting markets and segmented audiences provided the basis for an ever-growing commodification of the life world.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have explored two different approaches to the horizontal stratification of society and the particular social significance of the baby boom cohorts. The approach that takes as its starting point the importance of the birth cohort as a demographically bounded mechanism for social identity is one that we feel suffers from two serious flaws. The first problem we would identify is that the boundaries are neither fixed nor firm, with the North American experience being taken as paradigmatic rather than historically exceptional. The second difficulty is that cohort even if used in a stable and consistent manner fails to capture the dynamic nature of cultural and social change, serving merely as a "black box" from which a variety of meanings are drawn. There is little prece-

dent for any birth cohort establishing an identity for itself, defined seemingly by its relative size.

Our position is that the core of the cultural transformation in later life, already highlighted by Laslett in the late 1980s, derives from a key generational divide that has emerged and evolved during the second half of the twentieth century. While much has been written about the development of mass consumer society and the growth of mass communication during this period, these, though necessary preconditions, are insufficient to explain the phenomenon that is the third age. Closely allied to the rise of affluence across the life course, has been the expansion of market segmentation, characterised as much by the horizontal divisions of generation and life stage as by class education and gender. One major consequence has been the relative submergence of class and communal identities by those based upon consumer oriented lifestyle.

From such a perspective, the third age can be considered as an example of a generationally defined cultural field, where particular logics of power and influence operate that determine both the nature of the participants and the frameworks governing these practices. The underlying logic of the field is structured by consumption, a post-scarcity consumption that supports the search for distinction and that implicitly or explicitly rejects, denies or marginalises "old age". The practices that define this field are the routines of individualised consumption, routines whose function can be defined by or which help support what Foucault has referred to as "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1988). The logic that operates within the third age is the logic of consumption and the individualisation of society's material surplus.

The cultural capital of the third age derives from the effective use of leisure – engaging in what Ekerdt (1986) has referred to as the "busy ethic", with its emphasis upon activity, exercise, travel, eating out, self maintenance and self-care. Distinction lies less in the area of work, in one's past or present contribution to the social product and more in the arenas outside work – the creation of symbolically valued lifestyles. Work and leisure have become disconnected. Cultural capital flows more powerfully from the use and quality of individual leisure-time than from what work is done or how money is earned. The symbolic forms of capi-

tal that are legitimated within this field are those that support an active agentic consumerism.

The growing opportunities for personal choice that mass consumer society enables, indeed requires, helps maintain the continuing expansion of material and cultural capital and its overflow from use value into proliferating systems of distinction. Arenas of choice have expanded well beyond the traditional boundaries of the market, and now incorporate aspects of the life world previously held to be the preserve of either the family or the state. Within this post-sixties mentality, it is not youth per se that is bought and sold so much as the ideologies of youthfulness, symbolised by the consumerist quartet of virtues – choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure.

Old age – the attributed community of “the old” – forms a key boundary marking the limits of third age culture. The third age is defined both by the continuities of choice and the discontinuity of old age. Within the field is a conscious absence of an individualised old age. Old age is rejected as a collective choice because it seems to represent a return to the past. Communal representations of old age threaten to dissolve the lifestyles of autonomous individuals, turning them into an amorphous collective mass grave, the burial ground of individuality and choice. Old age is culturally marginalised because those who were old and out of date was the other that helped a generation define itself. As the signifier of material and symbolic bankruptcy, old age is simply not a choice.

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