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**The construction of the Baby Boomer generation as a  
social problem in Britain.**

PhD Thesis

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8 February 2015

## **Abstract**

The research presented in this thesis investigates how the 'Baby Boomer generation' has become constructed as a social problem in Britain. I begin by outlining the theoretical orientation of the research, which is grounded in Mannheim's understanding that the problem of generations is to do with the interaction between generational location and wider social forces. The subsequent chapters present the results of a qualitative media analysis of the Baby Boomer problem, using a sample of British national newspaper articles published between 1986 and 2011 to examine the development of a cultural script. These chapters outline, first, the main features of the Baby Boomer problem as it is currently presented, before moving on to analyse how the cultural script has, over time, constructed the Boomer generation in two main ways: as an economic problem, and as a cultural problem.

My findings indicate that both the attributes of the Baby Boomer generation, and the importance attached to generation as a political or social category, have changed over time, and are affected by wider political, social, and cultural shifts. This has a number of implications for how we think about the construction of the problem of generations in the present day.

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## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Who are the Baby Boomers?**

When John Haney (37), Chris Haney (39) and Scott Abbott (40) set about creating a second set of question cards for Trivial Pursuit, the enormously successful board game which they invented, they decided to make it for ‘people like us’. And people like the three Canadians, it turned out, were ‘the baby-boom generation... people who grew up with the Beatles and television’.  
(Turner 1986a, *Times*)

Not so long ago, one could be forgiven for not knowing who the Baby Boomers were. That has changed. In recent years, this generation has become the subject of numerous articles, books and policy debates; and everyone, now, seems to know who they are.

The Baby Boomers of our present-day imagination are embodied, not by the earnest players of Trivial Pursuit, who ‘grew up with the Beatles and television’ and ‘could tell you how many series of Monty Python were made, which British folk singer had a guitar labelled “This machine kills”, and Kookie Byrnes’s trademark act of vanity on 77 Sunset Strip’ (Turner 1986a, *Times*). They are embodied by the degenerate hedonists Patsy and Edina in the cult BBC sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*; the ‘stropky, cocky, randy epitome of rebellious Sixties youth’ Mick Jagger who, at 65, was still staging sell-out tours (Morrison 2008, *Times*); Tony Blair, the prime minister who, when he was popular, brought us ‘Cool Britannia’ and when he wasn’t, the Iraq war; and Bill Clinton, the US President sandwiched between two generations of George Bushes, who charmed and scandalised in equal measure.

On an everyday level, the Boomers appear to be embodied in ‘silver tsunami’ (Bone 2007, *Times*; Goldenberg 2007, *Guardian*) of ‘young olds’ who have just started retiring and threaten to live forever, allegedly sending the country into neverending debt as it struggles to pay for spiralling costs of pensions, health and social care, and using their considerable voting and purchasing power to skew markets and public policy around their own interests. They are the ‘Sixties generation’ (Edmunds and Turner 2002a, p. vii, *Guardian* 1992) who promised personal liberation, cultural



transformation, and eternal youth – until they hit retirement, when everybody realised what a mess they had made of everything, and what an enormous cohort they actually were. Or so the story goes. But this story is a one-sided one, at best.

The upsurge of interest in the Baby Boomers in recent years relies on a narrative that holds this generation responsible for an extraordinary range of social problems. The Conservative politician David Willetts, Minister of State for Universities and Science, accuses the Baby Boomers of throwing a 50-year-long party for which ‘the bills are coming in; and it is the younger generation who will pay them’ (Willetts 2010a, p. xv). These ‘future costs’ include ‘the cost of climate change, the cost of investing in the infrastructure our economy will need if we are to prosper, the cost of paying pensions when the big boomer cohort retires, on top of the cost of servicing the debt the government has built up’. But for Willetts, the Boomers’ failure goes way beyond poor financial management: ‘The charge is that the boomers have been guilty of a monumental failure to protect the interests of future generations’.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the left-leaning writer Francis Beckett, editor of the University of the Third Age’s (U3A) magazine *Third Age Matters*, accuses the Sixties generation of selling out on the radicalism of that era. ‘What began as the most radical-sounding generation for half a century turned into a random collection of youthful style gurus who thought the revolution was about fashion; sharp-toothed entrepreneurs and management consultants who believed revolution meant new ways of selling things; and Thatcherites, who thought freedom meant free markets, not free people,’ he declares bitterly. ‘At last it decayed into New Labour, which had no idea what either revolution or freedom meant, but rather liked the sound of the words’ (Beckett 2010a, p. ix). While Beckett’s appreciation of Sixties radicalism is clearly very different to that of Willetts, the central charge he levels against the Baby Boomers is exactly the same:

The baby boomers saw themselves as pioneers of a new world – freer, fresher, fairer and infinitely more fun. But they were wrong. The world they made for their children to live in is a far harsher one than the world they inherited.  
(Beckett 2010a, p. ix)

I began researching on the question of how the Baby Boomers became constructed as a social problem in Britain in the autumn of 2010. In this year, three high-profile British books were published that, as Machell and Lewy (2010) report in the *Times* (London), showed that publishers have ‘cashed in’ on the current ‘war between the generations’ (Kaletsky 2010, *Times*). These were, listed here in order of their significance to the debate:

- *The Pinch: How the baby boomers took their children’s future – and why they should give it back*, by David Willetts.
- *Jilted Generation: How Britain Has Bankrupted its Youth*, by Ed Howker and Shiv Malik.
- *What Did the Baby Boomers Ever Do For Us – Why the children of the sixties lived the dream and failed the future*, by Francis Beckett.

A further pamphlet – *It’s All Their Fault*, by Neil Boorman, described by Machell and Lewy as ‘[a]s much a screed as analysis’ – gained some attention by virtue of being published at the same time. All four books ‘seek to explain the political, social and economic factors that have combined to create the unusual (and for many, difficult) situation where parents seem to have had it better than their children. Some try to apportion blame’ (Machell and Lewy 2010, *Times*).

At this time, I was struck by a number of elements in the ‘Baby Boomer problem’ as it immediately appeared. First was the **range** of social problems for which the Boomers were held to be responsible, from environmental destruction to the financial crisis to sexual licence and rampant materialism. These are indicated in the quotes by Willetts (2010a) and Beckett (2010a) above. Second was the **consensus** about the extent to which the Boomers were to blame – a consensus stretching across the political spectrum, and also across the generations writing about the Boomers. Thus Willetts and Beckett both situate themselves clearly within the Baby Boomer generation, and offer their critiques as a form of generational *mea culpa*, while Howker and Malik, who are journalists for national newspapers and periodicals, situate themselves as members of the ‘jilted generation’ whose plight they attempt to articulate: ‘They are both 29 and live in London’ (Howker and Malik 2010a, front

matter). For these authors too, the ‘sheer size’ of the Baby Boomer generation ‘has some wide-ranging implications for our society’: as resource pressures intensify, ‘[t]he generation who will bail Britain out can’t quite get started’ in the labour market or on the property ladder, which indicates a fundamental problem with ‘the mechanism by which our society considers the past and the future – our relationship with time’ (Howker and Malik 2010a, pp. 6, 15, 14). In the present discourse, the notion that the Boomers somehow ‘took their children’s future’ (Willettts 2010a) seems to be shared across the generations.

The third element that struck me was the potential **consequence** of what appeared to be a deliberate strategy to articulate (and indeed, foment) a conflict between generations who are still very much living, related to one another both through kinship relations and wider social ties. ‘If circumstances get worse, people will begin looking for simple shapes,’ Howker and Malik (2010a, p. 15) warn. ‘They will start to seek out a narrative, any narrative. And then people will find someone to blame.’ The analysis presented in this thesis is an attempt to engage with the ‘generationalism’, a term used to describe ‘the systematic appeal to the concept of generation in narrating the social and political’ (White 2013, p. 216), as a way of explaining political and cultural shifts.

White draws out some of the tensions within the development of generation as ‘an emergent master-narrative on which actors of quite different persuasions converge as they seek to reshape prevalent conceptions of obligation, collective action and community’ (p. 217). Through an analysis of how the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem has developed over time, I indicate that ‘Boomer blaming’ has been mobilised within the political and cultural elite to explain problems that have their origin, not in generational or demographic shifts, but in wider social and historical factors. The primary impact of ‘generationalism’ is to mystify the causes of social problems, and to set in motion the very thing that Howker and Malik warn against: a simplistic narrative that relies on blaming older people for the myriad problems of the present day.

When a narrative of ‘Boomer blaming’ takes hold within the elite, practical consequences are likely to follow. These include policies designed to penalise the older

generation for the alleged benefit of the younger generations, and, more insidiously, encourage people to think at a ‘common sense’ level that their Baby Boomer parents, colleagues, or acquaintances are the cause of their own economic or existential difficulties. The Baby Boomers, after all, are not embodied only in political leaders or cultural caricatures, but within real people with whom we share our everyday lives. However, while my research suggests that fomenting generational conflict is the logical, and problematic, consequence of the narrative of Boomer blaming, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate the practical consequences. These areas deserve their own dedicated research, and would require different methods to the research employed here.

The fourth element of the Baby Boomer problem – which is the element that, above all, this thesis sets out to investigate – is the **contradictory character** of claims-making with regard to why the Boomers allegedly constitute a social problem in the present day. By analysing how the cultural script of this problem has developed over the past 26 years, I am able to show that, despite the extraordinary level of consensus that the Boomers constitute a social problem, explanations about who, exactly, the Boomers are, and why, exactly, they are a problem, vary widely and change over time. This indicates that the social problem of the Baby Boomer is not an objective fact that has only recently been discovered and articulated, but rather that generational explanations have come to be mapped onto pre-existing social problems, which have their origins somewhere other than within the generations.

Perhaps the starkest illustration of the contradictions within the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem is the extent to which claims-makers differ in their definitions of what the Baby Boomer generation actually is. The section below examines this point. From there, I provide a brief outline on the structure of this thesis, the theoretical orientation of the research and methodology used, and the key findings from my research into the construction of the Baby Boomer problem today. I conclude this introductory chapter by suggesting the way in which this thesis contributes to the sociology of knowledge and, on a more personal note, what it means to me.

## **1.2 Defining the Baby Boomers**

The phrase ‘Baby Boomers’ carries with it a wealth of meaning. At its most basic demographic level, it relates to a phenomenon that took place after the Second World War, where many countries in the Western world experienced a surge in the birthrate. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘baby boomer’ as ‘a person born during the baby boom following the Second World War (1939–45)’, and dates the use of this term to 1970, with a reference by the *Washington Post* to ‘[t]he baby boomers of the Eisenhower decade’ (OED Online 2014). In historical terms, the concept of the ‘baby boomer’ also relates to a time of economic ‘boom’ in the USA and, to a more limited extent, in the UK (Marwick 2003, Sandbrook 2005). When members of the Baby Boomer cohort were in their infancy, they were also discussed as ‘the post-second world war “baby bulge”’ (Toynbee 1998, 2014, *Guardian*); that ‘Baby Boom’ became the accepted definition reflects the twin historical and demographic characteristic ascribed to this cohort.

As explored in Chapter 2, the first problem in attempting to analyse generations is that the definition of a generation is itself contentious. Kertzer (1983, p. 125) notes that generation is a concept with a multitude of meanings, and has been of interest to human society for ‘many millennia’. Interest in generations is provoked in scholars focused on individual development, socialisation, and social change; thus the concept is discussed across a range of disciplines, including sociology, history, literature, philosophy, anthropology, and developmental psychology.

Interest in the Baby Boomer generation specifically is an international phenomenon, reflected in the academic and grey literature of North America, Europe and Australia. This reflects a combination of demographic, social, cultural and political trends. My research finds, however, there are noticeable gaps between the demographic existence of the Baby Boomer cohort, and the way the Baby Boomer generation is described and discussed in Britain through the contemporary cultural script. Thus, in the polemical grey literature recently published on the Baby Boomer problem in the UK, the precise dates ascribed to the Baby Boomer cohort vary according to the date periods preferred by those who are writing about them. Willetts (2010a, p. xv) defines the ‘boomers’ as ‘roughly those born between 1945 and 1965’. This definition is broadly shared by Boorman (2010, pp. 11-13), who sees his book in even broader terms, as ‘a chance for those born in the Seventies and Eighties to

respond to the chaos caused by those born in the Forties and Fifties'. A project launched by the Social Research Institute of the UK polling company Ipsos MORI following the publication of Willetts' *The Pinch* defines the Baby Boomers in 2010 as 'all adults aged 45-65' (Ipsos MORI, n.d.).

However, this 'wide' definition of the Baby Boomers, encompassing a cohort born over a period of 20 years, is challenged by other writers on the Baby Boomer problem. Beckett (2010a, p. vii) argues that there were in fact two baby booms in the post-war period, and that '[t]he classic baby boomers, born between 1945 and 1955, were a completely different sort of generation from those born at the start of the sixties'. Howker and Malik (2010a) distinguish between the "'first-wave" baby boom', which 'occurred in all Western countries following the end of the Second World War', and the "'second-wave baby boom"' in Britain:

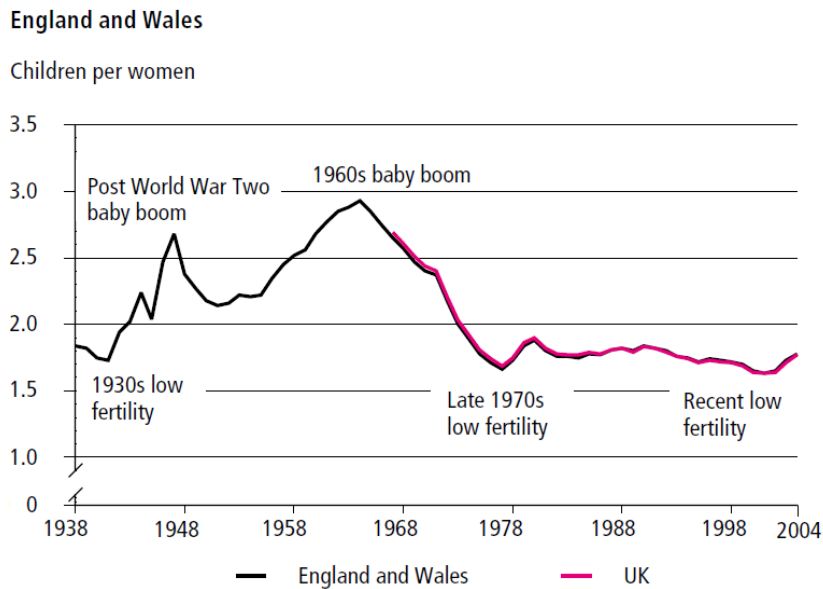
In America, that [post-war baby] boom carried on for the next twenty years, but in Britain it slowed down, rising again only between the years 1956 and 1965 in the 'second-wave baby boom'. Since then some have died and others have migrated, but today in total there are 16.7 million baby boomers in Britain. (Howker and Malik 2010a, pp. 4-5)

Jack (2011, *Guardian*) notes that the 'baby boomer generation' is 'a term borrowed from America and quite wrongly applied to the postwar pattern of British birth rates. (Not until 1975 were as few babies born as in 1945; more British babies were born between 1956 and 1966 than in the so-called boomer decade of 1945 to 1955.)' The US Census Bureau in fact defines the American postwar 'baby boom' as including 'people born from mid-1946 to 1964' (Werner 2011). The historian Jean-François Sirinelli (2003: title page, p. 9), meanwhile, defines the French Baby Boomers in both historical and demographic terms as encompassing 24 years ('Une génération, 1945-1969'), and suggests that an important factor in their significance was the 'coup de jeune' effected by the existence of a relatively large proportion of young people at a particular historical moment.

Figure 1 (below) illustrates the character of the two British 'Baby Booms', where a distinction is made between the 'Post World War Two baby boom' and the

more sustained '1960s baby boom'. Here, the fall in the fertility rate between 1950 and 1955 is very apparent, confirming the arguments put forward by Howker and Malik (2010a) and Jack (2011).

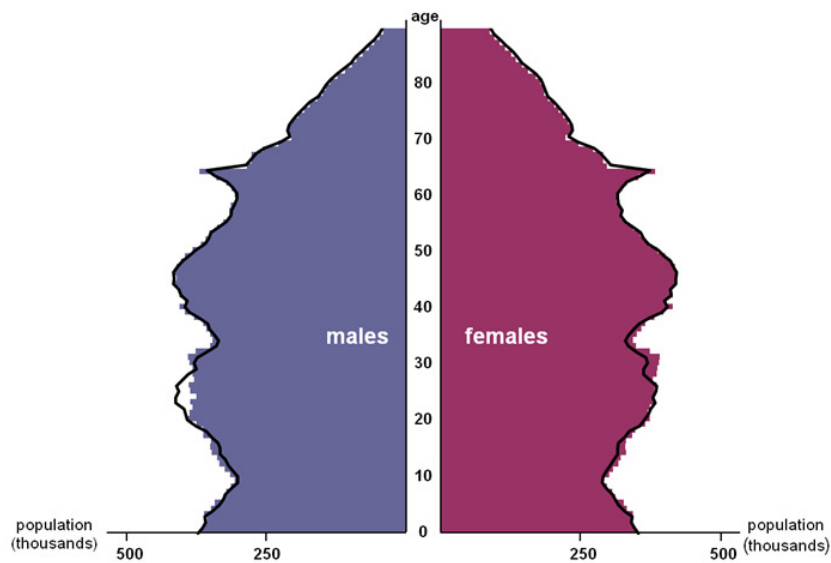
**Figure 1: Total Fertility Rate, 1938 to 2004**



Source: Office for National Statistics, General Register Office for Scotland, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. Reproduced from Chamberlain and Gill 2005, p. 76.

Figure 2 (below) illustrates the effect of these peaks and troughs in the birthrate on the demographic situation in England and Wales today, where the Baby Boomers now form a 'spike' in the proportion of people aged around 65, and a 'bulge' in the proportion of people between the ages of about 40 and 50. It is this age distribution, between the proportion of the population of working age and those of retirement age, which forms the basis of current anxieties about 'ageing societies', discussed in Chapter 5. However, for the purpose of defining the Baby Boomer cohort, it is worth indicating that '[t]he classic baby boomers, born between 1945 and 1955' (Beckett 2010a: vii) form a relatively small proportion of the retired population overall.

**Figure 2: Population pyramid for England and Wales, mid-2011.**



*Census-based estimates (bars) and mid-2011 rolled-forward estimates (line). Source: Office for National Statistics 2013.*

The disagreements over defining the British Baby Boomers as a demographic cohort, and the disparities between the demographic situation in Britain and other Anglo-American societies, reflects a wider conversation about the significance of this cohort, and the way ideas about its significance have changed over time. A useful discussion of this point is provided by Falkingham (1997), who notes that there were two ‘baby booms’ in Britain, in comparison to the more ‘pronounced’ rises in the crude birth rate that took place in the USA, Canada, Australia and France. Furthermore, Falkingham explains that the actual numbers of babies born in these peaks in the birth rate were relatively smaller:

For example, for the first 50 years of this century Canada averaged around 250,000 births per annum, with only slight variation from year to year. However, from 1952 to 1965 between 400,000 and 500,000 children were born every year – nearly twice the previous rate. For every two children born previously there were now at least three. According to the 1966 Census, one-third of the entire population of Canada had been born in the preceding 15 years.



In contrast, whilst the number of babies born in the UK in the years 1947 and 1964 exceeded 1 million, over the entire period 1941-81 the number of births averaged about 800,000 per year. Therefore even the absolute peaks of the two baby booms constituted only an additional 25 per cent over the average for the post-war decades. In place of every four births, in these years there were five. (Falkingham 1997, pp. 19-21)

For Falkingham, the relatively limited character of the British baby boom explains why, in 1997, there appeared to be relatively less interest in the 'Baby Boomers' in the UK than elsewhere. 'In other countries the baby boomers have long been a recognised social phenomenon, spawning a whole industry of sociological and economic analysis,' she writes. 'However, in the UK, baby boomers as a distinct social group rarely get a mention' (p. 18).

Research conducted for this thesis indicates that interest in the British Baby Boomer generation has increased significantly since the mid-1990s. This would appear to contradict Falkingham's insight about the relationship between the limited character of the demographic boom and its perceived social (in)significance. However, an analysis of the construction of the Baby Boomer problem suggests that, in fact, the relationship between the demographic characteristics of the British Baby Boomer cohorts and the claims made about their social, political and cultural significance has, from the start, been a relatively weak one, and that the construction of this problem owes more to the 'cross-national diffusion' (Best 2001) of claims about the Baby Boomer problem from the USA.

The concepts of claimsmaking and diffusion provide an important anchor for the analysis of the construction of the Baby Boomer problem offered by this thesis. I discuss these concepts briefly below, and in Chapter 3. The key point to note here is that in the past decade, the demographic characteristics of the British Baby Boomer cohort(s) have not changed since Falkingham was writing in 1997, but the perceived *social* significance of this generation – framed in political, economic, and cultural terms – has increased significantly. The very definition of the Baby Boomer generation thus expresses its construction as a social problem. This is particularly clear in attempts to define the Boomers, not just according to their year of birth, but according to the personal and cultural attributes with which they are associated.

### **1.3 Theoretical orientation and structure of thesis**

In examining how the Baby Boomers have been constructed as a social problem in present-day Britain, I begin by reviewing the historical literature on the sociology of generations. Attempts to define the meaning of ‘generation’ both reflect and are shaped by the wider context of their times. By understanding the historical context in which ideas about the significance of generations have developed and changed, we gain an insight into the extent to which the problem of generations is better understood, not as one that is naturally-given or temporally-fixed, but one that is socially constructed.

The sociology of generations can provide valuable insights into the empirical study of the experience of different birth cohorts and their engagement with the historical context in which they live, although the difficulties involved in such research have been well documented (see discussion in Pilcher 1994, 1995). However, the aim of this thesis is not to understand the experience of the Baby Boomer generation itself, but to understand how this generation has been constructed as a social problem in the present day. Implicit in the research question ‘How has the generation known as the “Baby Boomers” come to be constructed as a social problem in Britain today?’ is a subjectivist approach to social problems, which does not assume that because the Baby Boomers are presented as a social problem they objectively exist as such. Indeed, an analysis of the British press over the past 26-year period, discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, reveals that society’s perception of the Baby Boomer generation has shifted over time, only hardening in the very recent period into the consensus that this generation is a social problem.

A subjectivist, constructionist approach does not imply that the Baby Boomer problem is not a real one. As Best (2008) explains, the process by which social problems are constructed is not arbitrary, but ‘constrained by the physical world in which people find themselves’, and ‘the meanings that people construct need to make sense of the world they inhabit’ (pp. 11-12). In approaching this research, I accept that there is a demographic reality at the core of the Baby Boomer problem, in terms of the peaks in the post-war birth rate described above. I also accept that, in constructing the Baby Boomer generation as a problem, contemporary society is attempting to make sense of real and pressing problems, such as economic crises, the limitations of the welfare state, or confusion over moral or political values.

Where I come to question the claims that are articulated in the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem is the *relationship* between the problems for which society is attempting to find meaning, and the existence, behaviour, and outlook of the Baby Boomer generation. ‘It is precisely the dual character of society in terms of objective facticity *and* subjective meaning that makes its “reality *sui generis*”’, write Berger and Luckmann (1991, p. 30) in their classic 1966 text, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Understanding this relationship, between an objective fact (a cohort of people born at around the same time) and its subjective interpretation (how this cohort comes to be defined, and how its impact on the wider world is perceived), is a centrally important aspect of social constructionism: the methodological approach that informs the research conducted for this thesis.

Chapter 3 situates both the approach of social constructionism and the sociology of generations within the broader framework of the sociology of knowledge, to indicate the theoretical orientation of my analysis of the Baby Boomer problem. Karl Mannheim’s seminal essay on ‘The Problem of Generations’ was developed in the 1920s<sup>1</sup>, within his essays on the sociology of knowledge (Mannheim 1952, pp. 276-322), and Berger and Luckmann’s ‘social construction of reality’ is similarly located within that field. Although the sociology of generations often appears as a study of interpersonal relations or social structures, its roots lie in wider questions, about the way in which knowledge is transferred across time and space and re-made by each generation anew: as expressed in Hannah Arendt’s (2006 [1961]) concept of ‘natality’ and Mannheim’s appreciation of the importance of ‘fresh contact’ between newly-emerging members of a society and those who are already established. Running throughout this thesis, therefore, is a conversation with Mannheim about how we can understand the importance of generational location in relation to other social forces, almost a century on.

The methodology that I employ to analyse the construction of the Baby Boomer as a social problem in Britain emerges from the sociology of knowledge, and is also discussed in Chapter 3. The empirical research at the heart of this thesis is a media

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<sup>1</sup> The literature dates this essay variously at 1923, 1927, and 1928.

analysis, of articles published in the national British press over the period 1986-2011. From these datasets I describe the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem, and discuss how this script has been constructed over the past 26 years.

My interest in the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem draws on the recent work of Ann Swidler, Jorge Ardití and Arlie Russell Hochschild and others, who, as part of ‘The New Sociology of Knowledge’ (Swidler and Ardití 1994), attempt to understand better ‘the way culture is *used*’ (Swidler 2001, p. 5) in framing how phenomena are understood. In examining the construction of the cultural script, I have employed a mixed methods approach, blending elements of Fairclough’s (2003, p. 1) approach to the ‘*social* analysis of spoken and written language’ (emphasis in original) and Altheide’s (1996) qualitative methods of document analysis with the emphasis on ‘contextual constructionism’ developed by Best (2003, p. 60). This eclectic approach is inspired by the richness of insights offered by a number of interdisciplinary thinkers over the twentieth century; in particular, given the subject matter, Karl Mannheim and Frank Furedi.

By grounding document analysis in an appreciation of the deeper social problems process, the thesis contributes to the sociology of knowledge, by showing how a powerful idea within British culture and policy today – that the Baby Boomers constitute a social problem – has been developed, framed and articulated according to the wider political and cultural dynamics of its time. In line with the integrative approach taken by Mannheim, Berger and Luckmann, I have made use of historical literature to situate and clarify elements of the Baby Boomer problem as they emerge in my analysis of the present-day cultural script. Thus, while Chapter 2 reviews the literature on generations and Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical orientation of the thesis, the relevant literature is not confined to these chapters, but also brought into later chapters where it clarifies the empirical research.

My starting point for conducting a media analysis of the Baby Boomer problem was to understand, in the first instance, the way in which it is framed by the cultural and political elites: what claims are made, and how these claims are expressed and popularised by the national press. The cultural products (Mannheim 1952, p. 44) that I examined are articles that appear in four national British newspapers – *The Times*,

*Guardian*, *Mirror*, and *Daily Mail* – over the period 1986-2011. Chapter 3 explains the purpose of selecting these types of cultural product (rather than, say, television or internet news, or novels and films), these particular newspapers, and these dates; discusses the strengths and limitations of the quantitative and qualitative data drawn from these sources; and elaborates on the design of my qualitative study of these sources, which utilises the techniques of Qualitative Media Analysis developed by Altheide (1996).

Having presented the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem in the present day, I draw on a number of powerful sociological concepts in understanding how this script has been constructed over time. These include Mannheim's understanding of 'generation units' and their role in shaping the *Zeitgeist*; Best's concepts of claimsmaking and diffusion (Best 2001, 2008); and Loseke's (2003) suggestion that social constructionists should examine, not only the way in which particular conditions are constructed as a problem, but also the 'rhetorical practice' by which particular *people* become constructed as a problem (p. 120). I discuss these concepts in more depth in Chapter 3.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the findings of my empirical research into the construction of the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem over the past 26 years. Drawing both on this new research and on the relevant historical and sociological literature, these chapters indicate that the Baby Boomers are presented in the present day as a social problem in two main ways: an economic problem, and a cultural problem. The construction of the Boomers as an economic problem draws upon a 'demographic consciousness' (Furedi 1997) that sees absolute or relative population size as having a determining impact on social trends. This thesis indicates that, in the context of the global economic crisis of the early twenty-first century, the relatively large size of the Baby Boomer cohort (as widely defined, according to the birth dates 1945-1965) came to be seen as an explanation for the perceived shortage of resources, the problem of over-consumption, and the unsustainable character of the postwar welfare state.

However, while a demographic consciousness has, to some extent, framed the narrative of the Baby Boomers since this cohort was first identified, it has become

*moralised* in recent years through a critique of the values, decisions, and behaviour associated with the ‘Sixties generation’. There appears to be a certain disquiet underlying the narrative of the Baby Boomers ever since the elder part of this cohort came of age, because of its historical location within the turmoil of the Sixties – but this was tempered by an excitement about the possibility of this new generation embodying a new kind of political agency, which could affect positive social change. In the twenty-first century, the ‘Sixties generation’ is perceived as having had its moment, and failed; indeed, as the quotes from Willetts and Beckett above indicate, ‘Boomer’ values, decisions, and behaviour are now hailed as directly responsible for the myriad social problems we face today.

The research conducted for this thesis indicates that the construction of the Baby Boomers as an economic problem exists in a symbiotic relationship with its construction as a cultural problem. That is to say, the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem does not develop in a straightforward, linear way – there are numerous contradictory claims, counter-claims, and historical moments when the Baby Boomers are discussed as a generational *solution* to contemporary political and cultural problems. But in the recent period, a heightened sense of negativity about both the economic impact and cultural contribution ascribed to the Baby Boomer generation has fused, in a context where ‘thinking generations’ (White 2013) has become an influential way of conceptualising social problems.

Chapter 7 outlines the contribution of this thesis to the wider sociology of knowledge, and indicates where future research could fruitfully be conducted.

#### **1.4 What the Baby Boomer problem means to me**

As noted above, the grey literature that has, in recent years, popularised the claim that the Baby Boomers are a social problem, contains a self-conscious reference to the generational location of those making the claim. Chapter 3 explores the significance of this, in the extent to which it has the effect of ‘personalising’ the social problems that are then laid at the Baby Boomers’ door, and contributes to the mobilisation of a narrative of victims and villains. In the spirit of recognising the role played by the subjectivity of the researcher in conducting qualitative research, and given the

peculiarly emotive and personalised character of the narrative of the Baby Boomer problem, I should note at this point that I was born in 1975 – situated within the cohort popularly known as ‘Generation X’<sup>2</sup> or, in Britain, ‘Thatcher’s Children’ (Pilcher and Wagg 2005) – to parents born in 1947 and 1948 respectively (the classic post-war Baby Boom).

My own generational location has fuelled my interest in the Baby Boomer problem, in both personal and intellectual ways. On a personal level, my parents could be seen to personify the Baby Boomer made familiar to us by the wealth of cultural description. My father, Steve (Stephen), was the eldest son of parents who met during the Second World War, and their encounter remains a treasured story within family folklore. My grandfather, Don, grew up in Guildford, Surrey and was called up into the Royal Air Force at the age of 19; at the age of 21, his plane was shot down and he spent the remaining four years of the war in a Prisoner of War camp in Germany. During that time, he became friends with a fellow captive, who was married to Phyllis Hathaway (my great-aunt Phil), and began to correspond with Phyllis’s 17-year-old sister, Betty (my grandmother). Don returned to England at the end of the war, met Betty for the first time, and they married in 1947. My father was born in December 1948, and his brother Paul shortly after that: classic ‘postwar babies’, born to young war veterans in the first years of peacetime. Betty and Don settled in Slough, near Betty’s family: Dad went to grammar school, and, at 17, on to the London School of Economics (LSE), from which he graduated in 1969.

I am grateful to my uncle, Paul Bristow, for collating Grandad’s wartime essays and letters into a history of his time spent as a Prisoner of War. Concluding his introduction to that document, Paul writes: ‘Betty and Don were Mum and Dad to Stephen and me. We miss them. They live on in these pages.’

My mother, Kath (Kathleen) Bloomfield, was born in Nottingham in 1947, the middle of five children, to older parents (Arthur and Elsie). Her father worked in the

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<sup>2</sup> The label ‘Generation X’ was originally coined by Charles Hamblett and Jane Deverson in their 1964 book *Generation X*, and applied to the generation currently known as the Baby Boomers. In more recent years, the label is taken to apply to the generation that followed the Baby Boomers, coined by the Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland in his cult novel, also titled *Generation X*. (See discussion in Asthana and Thorpe 2005.)

local hosiery factory, the family lived in a council house, and the three eldest children attended grammar school. Mum gained a place at the LSE; she met Dad there, and also graduated in the class of 1969. My parents married in 1971, and went on to work in Further Education and the Polytechnic sector; they eventually settled in the West Midlands, a reasonable distance from both Slough and Nottingham. So, as an example of the social mobility associated with the postwar years, my mother can also be seen as a typical ‘Baby Boomer’: part of a wave of clever working-class girls who were able to move, both geographically and in terms of social class, away from the circumstances of their birth.

If generational location could be measured by a checklist, my parents would surely have all the ‘Baby Boomer’ boxes ticked. Dad was a post-war baby, Mum a recipient of the social housing, grammar schools, and student grants associated with the welfare state in its heyday, and their attendance at LSE – one of the universities where the limited student protest movement in Britain had a visible impact (Marwick 1999, Thomas 2002) – in the late 1960s situates them squarely within the ‘Sixties generation’. Yet my parents’ experience also highlights the extent to which the caricatured portrait of the Baby Boomer problem, described in Chapter 4, distorts both historical reality and the meaning of lives that have been lived. Their biographies were not ‘given’ by free orange juice and student grants, but moulded through commitment and hard work.

The Sixties was not experienced as a complete break with the politics and struggles of the past, or a time of rosy affluence. In another family story, my parents’ (‘Baby Boomer’) friend Chris, also from the LSE class of 1969, in 1971 successfully represented my maternal grandfather and others in a labour law dispute following a strike.<sup>3</sup> On a wider canvas, the Winter of Discontent, the miners’ strike, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, were experienced more decisively as marking the end of the old politics of left and right than were events of the Sixties. Like everybody else at that time, my parents lived through the economic, political and military crises of the Seventies and Eighties, with all the uncertainty that they involved. While they moved away from their birth families and created a life that was not

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<sup>3</sup> *Arthur Bloomfield and others v Springfield Hosiery Finishing Co Ltd*, 1971. See Sergeant and Lewis (2008, p. 54).



defined by where they came from, they retained a closeness to, respect for, and responsibility towards their parents, siblings and extended family that is, I would contend, far more 'typical' of the Baby Boomers whom I actually know than is the vision of the selfish, 'anti-family' narcissist depicted in the present-day cultural script.

However, these personal observations do not evidence make: and it is partly because of my generational and emotional proximity to the subject matter that I chose media analysis as the most appropriate research method for my study of the Baby Boomer problem. By examining published documents, I avoid many of the ethical issues that arise from interview-based qualitative research; however, I accept, following Hochschild (2003), that many social scientists 'consider it risky to link a personal journey to an intellectual journey because doing so reveals a personal "bias"'. But as she also notes, personal engagement with an intellectual pursuit does not lead to uncritical regurgitation of personal prejudice; rather:

[O]ur subjectivity, with the wealth of comparisons it implants in us, transforms us into tourists of ourselves, visitors of the odd signs of everyday life. It removes the dull sense that anything at all is obvious. Every social scientist has his or her subjectivity; the question is how we use it. (Hochschild 2003, p. 6)

The challenge is, as Hochschild explains, to ensure that subjectivity is 'used' in a way most likely to gain an 'objective' appreciation of a phenomenon – in Weberian terms, 'finding the truth'. To this end, she stresses the need to 'run our hunches through every kind of test'. In this thesis, the principal test that I employed was to examine the development of a phenomenon – the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem – from a source that was external to my own lived experience; the national media. As explained in Chapter 3, I was careful to use both quantitative and qualitative data to illustrate the development of the Baby Boomer problem, and to situate my findings within a wider body of historical and sociological literature, to guard against drawing impressionistic conclusions.

Two additional factors helped in my conviction that subjective engagement with the research question could be positively harnessed, and my confidence that media analysis was the most appropriate research method for this particular study. The

first is my previous career experience as a journalist and, more recently, an associate of the Centre for Parenting Culture Studies (CPCS) at the University of Kent. When I began my career in journalism at the age of 21, the articles I would write consisted, in the main, of critical commentary about claims that had been made about young people, by politicians and campaigners, and the ways these had been reported in the mainstream press. This led to a weekly column in the *Daily Telegraph* under the title ‘My Generation’, where I would critique the latest survey or campaign about young people that relied on dubious statistics or partial insights.

Some years on, working with the CPCS (and as a parent myself), I find myself analysing the kind of claims made about parents and parenting culture in a very similar way, and worrying about the consequence for relations between the generations (see for example, Bristow 2009, 2013; Furedi and Bristow 2010; Lee *et al.* 2014). This experience has taught me both the truth of that old adage – ‘Don’t believe what you read in the newspapers’ – and the more sobering truth of our times, that what we read in the newspapers really matters in articulating the way that social problems come to be understood, and the policy consequences that follow. It has also kept alive my interest in ‘generation’ as a means by which we make sense of our experiences, and relate to others in our personal life: not just our parents, children, and coevals, but the ancestors whose world ‘lives on’ in books, letters, and family stories, and the future generations whose history we are helping to make.

Finally, I was assisted in the quest for objectivity by the simple fact that the topic of enquiry, and my own biographical location within it, does not make it obvious what the subjective stance on the Baby Boomer problem would be. Put simply, should I be persuaded to be more critical of the Baby Boomers because my own birth cohort is presented as its victim, or should I be less critical of the Boomers because I love my parents? It could go either way. Indeed, the fact that the discourse surrounding the Baby Boomers frequently does go both ways, as I indicate in the course of this thesis, makes this, to my mind, an ideal topic for open-ended enquiry.

## **Chapter 2 The sociology of generations – Review of the literature**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the development and significance of the concept of ‘generation’, as a foundation for the exploration of the contemporary problem of generations that follows. I begin by indicating that an awareness of generations has existed since pre-modern times; even before it was explosively depicted in Turgenev’s 1861 novel, the relationship between ‘fathers and sons’ has been understood as a source of both continuity and conflict. However, the specific contribution that sociology has made to the study of generation has been to analyse this phenomenon as a concept: attempting to elucidate its significance, rather than assume it.

Mannheim’s essay on ‘The Problem of Generations’ drew upon previous attempts, within sociology and other disciplines, to define ‘generation’ and grasp its meaning in the course of social change. Mannheim’s work is central to this thesis, and as such forms the focal point of the material reviewed in this chapter. By understanding something of the way that generations appeared in pre-modern times, and in early industrial society, we can appreciate Mannheim’s formulation of the concept in the 1920s and the significance of its impact at the time.

However, there have subsequently been attempts to develop the concept of generation in different ways, which have also been shaped by the context in which the ‘problem of generations’ appears. The conversation with Mannheim that runs throughout this thesis acknowledges the range of existing literature, and draws out the relevance of Mannheim’s work to our understanding of the construction of the Baby Boomer problem today.

### **2.2 The range of generation theory**

The historical interest in generations is well noted (see for example Bengston, Furlong and Laufer 1974; Eisenstadt 1956; Jaeger 1985; Kertzer 1983; Kriegal 1978; Nash 1978; Pilcher 1994; Spitzer 1973). However, historical recognition of generations as significant does not mean that there is a single, timeless definition: as Spitzer (1973)

argues, 'Each generation writes its own history of generations' (p. 1353). The indeterminacy of the concept of generation persists throughout the literature. Berger (1960) muses that 'From a "Victorian age" spanning about 60 years, we seem to have reached a point where a change in *Zeitgeist* may be expected at approximately ten-year intervals' (p. 11). Abrams (1970) argues that efforts to apply the term 'generations' to the 'whole age categories of a society' tend to 'end up either as genealogy (the history of fathers and sons in particular families) or as waffle' (p. 176).

The influence of articles such as Berger (1960) 'How Long is a Generation?' (*The British Journal of Sociology*); Rintala (1963) 'A Generation in Politics: A Definition' (*The Review of Politics*); Ryder (1965) 'The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change' (*American Sociological Review*); Spitzer (1973) 'The Historical Problem of Generations' (*The American Historical Review*); Rosow (1978) 'What is a Cohort and Why?' (*Human Development*), Nash (1978) 'Concepts of Existence: Greek Origins of Generational Thought' (*Daedalus*); and Riley's (1979) edited collection, *Aging from Birth to Death: Interdisciplinary perspectives*, indicate the attempts across the disciplines to critique and clarify categories and approaches to generation studies. The sociological literature on generations that has developed over the twentieth century refers to sources across these disciplines. Therefore reviewing the sociology of generations necessarily requires engagement with key texts that emerged out of other fields, including novels – 'that first and last resort of the sociologist in search of data' (Berger 1960, p. 12) – and other cultural sources.

For a contemporary definition of generation, the most natural place to start is with the dictionary. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2009) offers a long list of the various permutations of the noun 'generation'; the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* provides a more concise summary:

**generation - I** - That which is generated. **1** The offspring of the same parent or parents regarded as a single step or stage in descent; such a step or stage. **b** Offspring, progeny; descendants. **c** Family, race, stock; a class or kind of people or animals. **d** A kind or type, esp. of a computer, that is seen as representing a distinct advance on earlier kinds, or a recognized further stage of development. **2** The whole body of people born and living at about the same

time; later also, the average length of time in which children become ready to take the place of their parents, usu. reckoned at about thirty years. (Brown 1993, p. 1075)

This definition usefully brings out the scope of the generation concept in its modern usage. Generation has a natural element and a social element: in human terms, it applies to birth, procreation and death, but to also the relationships between individuals constituted within the family, and as perceived in cohort terms by society at large.

Kertzer (1983) presents four categories of generation. The first is *kinship descent*, where the idea ‘has a long tradition in social anthropology. Unlike sociologists, social anthropologists use it in referring not so much to parent-child relations as to the larger universe of kinship relations ... Demographers have utilised this sense of the term in attempting to develop measures for “length of generation”. Here the interest is in population replacement, based on the reproduction of females’. The second is *cohort*, the ‘widespread’ use of which has been influenced by demographers, and where ““generation” refers to the succession of people moving through the age strata, the younger replacing the older as all age together’. Kertzer notes that the usage is ‘widespread beyond sociology’ and ‘finds frequent expression in intellectual history, where, for example, “literary generations” may succeed one another each 10 or 15 years’. He also explains that ‘the cohort notion of generation has extended beyond birth cohorts to apply to any succession through time’ - referring, for example, to ‘first, second or third “generations” of health behaviour studies... or to marital “generations”’ (Kertzer 1983, p. 126).

The *life stage* category refers to ‘such expressions as the “college generation”’, and Kertzer argues that ‘Sorokin’s [1947] discussion of generation can best be understood in this sense, for he attributed the conflict between “younger and older generations” to the differential response of people of different ages to the same events.’ According to Kertzer, ‘Eisenstadt’s (1956) classic study combined the descent and life-stage meanings of generation.’ The fourth category, *historical period*, is, writes Kertzer:

... less common in sociology than in history, where books bearing such titles as *The Generation of 1914* ... are numerous. In this sense, ‘generation’ covers a

wide range of cohorts. However, though it is the great historical event that defines such 'generations', they are often linked in practice to the cohorts of youths and young adults thought to be particularly influenced by such events. (Kertzer 1983, p. 127)

These four categories provide a useful summary of the different ways in which the concept of generation might be employed. However, it is complicated by a number of factors. As Kertzer notes, 'These meanings are all found in the sociological literature; indeed, many sociologists simultaneously use more than one' (p. 126); and as discussed below, the literature is rife with disagreements about what these categories mean and how they can be employed.

Pilcher (1995) argues that the 'acknowledged deficiencies of the life cycle concept' have led it to be superseded by the 'now more highly favoured concept of the *life course*' (p. 18). This perspective 'has considerable value for the sociological study of age and interage group relationships, particularly arising from the theme of transition and the centrality of cultural and historical contexts' (Pilcher 1995, p. 21). Hareven (2000), who is 'most closely associated' with the life course concept (Pilcher 1995, p. 18), explains:

The life-course approach has introduced a dynamic dimension into the historical study of the family, and it has moved analysis and interpretation from a simplistic examination of stages of the family cycle to an analysis of individuals' and families' timing of life transitions in relation to historical time ... The pace and definition of timing patterns are determined by their social and historical context. (Hareven 2000, p. 14).

The development of the life-course approach speaks to a more individualised approach to generation than the approaches previously outlined by Kertzer, and a greater sensitivity to variations in experience within and between generations. It also reflects a continuity of the way that generation theory has taken into account wider temporal shifts, which shape the meaning attached to age categories and their relation to social and cultural shifts.

Abrams (1970) summarises how the sociological significance of generations relate to the wider course of social change. The consciousness of a generation is, he argues, 'both more exclusive than that of an age group, and it is carried forward beyond the bounds of age spans, age groups and, in principle, the life cycle'. A sociological generation may encompass 'many biological generations': indeed, 'The whole history of many traditional and tribal societies often represents no more than one sociological generation'. In sociological generations, '[w]hat we are dealing with are major redefinitions of whole cultures triggered by the reaction of particular age-groups within particular age spans to particular historical experiences; the convergence of individual time and social time; of age and history' (Abrams 1970, pp. 183-4). How this process of generational consciousness works itself out is a major theme in the literature, and is important to an analysis of the construction of the Baby Boomer problem.

While much of the literature on the sociology of generations does not attempt to add precise dates to the changes of meaning(s) attached to the concept, there is general agreement that generation both became a more urgent topic of study, and acquired a subtly different reality, in industrial society than in pre-industrial society. The twentieth century is of greatest significance, with the work of Karl Mannheim and S. N. Eisenstadt in particular providing the theoretical base for the subsequent study of this phenomenon. Before turning to the development of modern sociological theories of generations, however, it is worth considering how this problem manifested itself in pre-industrial societies, where it appears to have been rather more than 'the simple recognition of a demographic fact' (Kriegel 1978, p. 23) but rather less than the formal recognition of a 'connection between the continuing process of the succession between fathers and sons and the discontinuous process of social and cultural changes' (Jaeger 1985, p. 274).

### **2.3 Conceiving of generations**

Nash's (1978) influential article 'Concepts of Existence: Greek Origins of Generational Thought', explains:

[O]ur most secure standard for defining a generation rests on the Greek root of the word, *genos*, whose basic meaning is reflected in the verb *genesthai*, ‘to come into existence’; until 1961 the first definition of the word in Webster’s unabridged dictionary was still ‘procreation’. That moment when a child is born simultaneously produces a new generation separating parent and offspring – *gonos ergo genos* – and the very concept educes the paradox of an ever-shifting threshold in time. (Nash 1978, p. 1)

Nash (1978) notes, further, that ‘Generational age distinctions, the claim of aristocratic ancestry, and identification with a peer group continued to be asserted throughout the Classical, Hellenistic, and Classical Roman periods’ (pp. 17-18). Kertzer (1983) argues that the concept of generation has ‘prospered’ in cultures around the world: ‘Its privileged place in Western societies is reflected in its codification in the Bible, while the most disparate societies of Africa, Asia and Australia have incorporated the generational concept in their notions of the social order’ (p. 125). Eisenstadt’s (1956) book *From Generation to Generation* states as a ‘universal fact’ that ‘in every society age differences and similarities enter into the formation of that society’s “human images”, into the cultural definition of that man’s life and destiny’, and that ‘these definitions [are] always diffuse and complementary’ (Eisenstadt 1956, p. 24). Durkheim (1954) included a discussion of generation within his 1915 work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

In his reflections on the ‘controversial concept’ of generations in history, Jaeger (1985) argues that ‘[t]he naïve and original meaning of generation is without doubt a biological-genealogical one’, which indicates that ‘descendants of a common ancestor take about thirty years to marry and have children’. This ‘remains the natural conception today’, and is also how the classical tradition conceived generations, as shown by the Old Testament, Greek poetry and historiography’. The other, ‘historical’ notion of generation ‘originates out of the biological-genealogical concept with an additional assumption, namely that there exists a connection between the continuing process of the succession between fathers and sons and the discontinuous process of social and cultural changes’. The classical writing of history, argues Jaeger, ‘did not deal with this additional assumption, although historians of antiquity must have been



aware of contrasts based on discontinuity during a time of rapid political and cultural change' (Jaeger 1985, p. 274).

However, Nash's (1978) discussion of the Greek origins of generational thought indicates the subtlety of the concept in ancient society. '[E]ven when it is closely tied to its primary meaning, the concept of generation maintains an ultimate relativity', Nash explains: 'the child forms a generation only with respect to his parents, or when children are in turn born to him'. In this respect, generation is the 'reference point' for 'a multitude of concepts, a very metaphor for existence' (p.2). She elaborates:

Like the verb *to be*, generation requires an adjective of context, a predicate of relativity, before it takes on meaning. Used sometimes with complacency ('*my* generation'), sometimes with belligerency ('*your* generation') and even with affection, as when Telemachus vows his friendship to Peisistratus by reason of their similar ages, generation marks allegiance, time of life, span of years, sameness with one group and otherness from the rest. (Nash 1978, p.2; emphasis in original)

Nash's discussion of Greek thought continually contrasts ancient conceptualisations of generation with those employed in the modern world. She emphasises the continuity of certain aspects of generational thought: that '[g]enerational age distinctions, the claim of aristocratic ancestry, and identification with peer group... form the intellectual history of our own conceptual approach to this abstraction, just as, linguistically, "generation" preserves its Greek root' (pp. 17-18). However, the fact that 'generational continuity... is a touchstone of the remarkable stability of tradition throughout the changing ancient world' brings into stark relief the 'greater confusion' attached to defining generational questions and life-stages today (p. 18, p. 4). The ancient Greeks attached hierarchical and relative meaning to generational categories, where 'the stages of life have an enduring reality, a continuity of development, which can be categorized and characterized', and '[g]enerational awareness is strong because old and young are recognizably distinct, but also complementary' (p. 11). She contrasts this to the 'blurring' of generational standards in the modern world of 1978, where:

Generational uncertainty derives not from lack of definition but lack of relativity: like the monotonous and frequent format to which world events, many and varied, are daily reduced (two minutes or two columns), personal definitions of the events of one's life or the stride of one's psyche lack a sense of history. Activities of the present have no relative value to the past and no predictive value for the future self. (Nash 1978, p. 4)

## 2.4 Modernisation and generational disruption

The literature recognises a schism between industrial and pre-industrial societies, in terms of the conceptualisation and significance of generational relations. This does not mean, however, that pre-industrial society lacked a sophisticated or subtle approach to generational relations, or that the stability of such societies meant that they were free of generational conflict. For example, one subject of historical interest in pre-industrial Britain is the system of primogeniture, which is understood to have created and expressed both intergenerational and intragenerational strife. As Montrose (1981) explains, in his thoughtful analysis of 'social process and comic form' in Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, many of Shakespeare's plays 'turn upon points of transition in the life cycle – birth, puberty, marriage, death – where discontinuities arise and where adjustments are necessary to basic interrelationships in the family and society' (p. 29). Generational tensions emerge between parent and child, and between siblings, that speak to the broader structure of society at that time:

Primogeniture conflates the generations in the person of the elder brother and blocks the generational passage of the younger brother. What might be described dispassionately as a contradiction in social categories is incarnated in the play, as in English social life, in family conflicts and identity crises. (Montrose 1981, p. 36)

In *As You Like It*, 'the play's *dramatis personae*... fall into the three functional age groups of Elizabethan society: youth, maturity, and old age' (Montrose 1981, p. 38). Gillis's (1974) historical discussion of 'youth in pre-industrial Europe' similarly draws attention to the tensions surrounding primogeniture, and confirms the relatively fixed and simple delineation of life stages indicated by Montrose and Nash. Gillis presents

four 'phases of life' in pre-industrial society: childhood, youth, parenthood, and death or retirement. Gillis characterises youth as a period of 'semi-dependence': 'a very long transition period, lasting from the point that the very young child first became somewhat independent of its family, usually about seven or eight, to the point of complete independence at marriage, ordinarily in the mid- or late twenties' (Gillis 1974, p. 2). Ariès's (1996 [1962]) discussion confirms the shifting parameters around conceptualisations of childhood and youth over the centuries (see also Cunningham 2006).

Industrialisation brought to the fore a conflict between continuity and change, and part of this process was a disruption of the stable generational ties and rigid generational boundaries. This tension is what, according to Eisenstadt (1963), marks generations out as a distinct problem in industrial societies. Whereas pre-industrial societies rely on the family as the primary unit of socialisation, and stable social roles and identities are given by lineage, industrial society weakens the significance of kinship bonds due to its foundation on 'the universal criteria of citizenship'. The ensuing contradictions between the family and the world of work creates a particular crisis point for youth in modern societies, as this is the time of necessary transition from one to the other. In industrial societies the scope of kinship relations diminishes, as the family 'does not constitute a basic unit of the division of labour' or of political or ritual activities, occupations are not transmitted through heredity, and 'the general scope of the activities of the family has been continuously diminishing, while various specialized agencies tend to take over its functions in the fields of education and recreation'. Thus, argues Eisenstadt: 'especially in the first phase of modernisation there has been a growing discontinuity between the life of the children, whether in the family or the traditional school and in the social world with its new and enlarged perspectives' (Eisenstadt 1963, p. 31).

In industrial societies, then, generations appear to emerge as a problem of modernisation. Here we see the development of generational tensions particularly in relation to youth, who must go through a transition from a life governed by kinship relations (the family) to operating as an individual citizen in the adult world. Institutions such as education – from schooling through to universities – and (to a more partial extent) institutionalised youth groups, emerge as a focus for study and

discussion, for their role in both bridging the gap between family and society, and exacerbating the contradictions already present.

Gillis's historical account supports the view of later pre-industrial society as an era in which relatively fixed social and generational boundaries both revealed and shaped social continuity, but where tensions were also developing. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, these tensions began to come more sharply to the fore.

'Generational tensions often characterise societies in the first stages of economic and political modernization, and Europe was no exception', he writes:

... and in the period 1770-1870 the traditions of youth were redrawn along class lines, with the laboring classes developing their own distinctive youth culture organized around the neighbourhood gang, and the upper and middle classes creating forms exclusively their own, including the modern student movement and bohemianism. (Gillis 1974, pp. 37-38)

Gillis notes, further, that 'Tradition did not always stand in the way of change, but interacted with it in ways that made custom itself an important agent of transformation' (p. 38).

The relationship between generational tensions and wider processes of social change, and the ways these play out in familial and fraternal relationships, is reflected in Ivan Turgenev's 1861 novel *Fathers and Sons* (also translated as *Fathers and Children*), which is widely acknowledged as 'the classic portrait of conflict between generations' (Letwin 1978, p. 53; Turgenev 2003). Intense generational conflict is placed at the heart of this work, both as a story of familial conflict and as an allegorical representation of progress and social change. However, it is notable that even this depiction of conflict is tempered by the simultaneous depiction of restraint, operating through both the affectionate ties of the family and the flexible strength of social tradition.

Chamberlin and Weiner (1971) draw out of the similarities between Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, and the Spanish writer Galdós's novel *Doña Perfecta*, written in 1876. This comparison is useful in that it indicates the extent to which an appreciation

of generational conflict was part of the spirit of that age, extending across different countries, and tied to broader ideas about continuity and change: in particular, social and technological progress. Chamberlin and Weiner argue that Galdós ‘saw that Spain (like Russia) was terribly backward in comparison with many other European countries, and he understood that the scientific point of view (along with modern engineering and industrialization) was an essential weapon in the new generation’s struggle for the control and destiny of the Spanish nation’; and also, like Turgenev, ‘recognized that the conflict was not merely a struggle between youth and old age’ (p. 20). In both novels, write Chamberlin and Weiner, ‘the young hero is soon drawn into direct and fierce verbal conflict by an older representative of the family he is visiting’:

In either case the older man, a member and defender of the established social order, is hostile to the younger man’s ideas, and provokes him with half-truths and ironical statements. The younger man rises to the challenge and becomes (because of training and temperament) outspoken to a fault, openly expounding his German- and French-inspired liberal and positivistic opinions. (Chamberlin and Weiner 1971, p. 21)

However, despite the similarities between *Fathers and Sons* and *Doña Perfecta*, Chamberlin and Weiner stress that ‘one is not an imitation of the other’, and point to important differences – not least, in the authors’ approach to change:

Galdós clearly believed that natural science in the hands of the younger generation constituted a real key to his country’s salvation and regeneration. Turgenev, on the other hand, was ambivalent; he perhaps even feared the manifestations of science and progress that he exemplified in his protagonist Bazarov. The struggle in *Fathers and Sons* is not primarily a struggle of science and progress against religion allied with feudalism (as in Galdós’ novel), but rather science and nihilism (the latter a term which Turgenev made famous) against the old aristocratic sentimentality, with its attendant good manners and decadent gentility. (Chamberlin and Weiner 1971, p. 21)

Turgenev’s ambivalence about the course of social progress is illustrated in his contrasting presentations of the fraught relationship between Bazarov and his parents,

alongside other representatives of the older generation, and Arkady's more tolerant, temperate relationship with his father, whose resigned acceptance that 'now *our* turn is come; now is it for us to be told by our heirs that we come of a different generation from theirs, and must kindly swallow the pill' (Turgenev 2003, p. 54) mirrors Arkady's willingness to 'compromise and accommodate himself to the older generation' (Chamberlin and Weiner 1971, p. 21).

The stark expression of generational conflict was not, however, a universal feature of European literature during this period. A useful appreciation of the gradual, and differential, consciousness of generational conflict is given by Shirley Robin Letwin (1978), in her analysis of the treatment of intergenerational – along with political, and social – conflict given by the nineteenth-century writer Anthony Trollope (1815-1882). Letwin begins with a seeming paradox: that while Turgenev was producing *Fathers and Sons*, 'his contemporary in England, Anthony Trollope, was describing a world in where such conflict is unknown'. While there is no 'dearth' of 'quarrels between parents and children, old and young' in Trollope's novels, 'most of the stories end happily', and 'mainly parents learn to accept their children's choices' (Letwin 1978: 53).

Noting that some have argued that 'the happy endings are meretricious and that Trollope is more convincing when he is portraying the conflict that is the inescapable result of great changes', while others have argued that 'there was no fatal conflict between parents and children, because they lived in an unchanging world where the young were disposed to conform to the ideals and conventions imposed by their elders and deviated only in trivial ways', Letwin sets out to demonstrate that '[b]oth these conclusions are wide of the mark'. In fact: 'What accounts for the harmony between old and young is not any absence of serious differences, but an attitude to disagreement and change, what might be called the attitude of a gentleman' (pp. 53-4). This approach to continuity and change is what, writes Letwin, underpins 'the conception of politics common to all gentlemen in Trollope's world' (p. 57)

What 'distinguishes the attitude of the gentleman' in politics, writes Letwin, 'is his readiness to acknowledge the disparity between the urgency of what has to be done today and its unimportance in the future'; and '[t]he same attitude to disagreements and

to changes of opinion that Trollope's gentlemen display in politics makes it possible for children to differ with their parents without thinking or saying, as Nicholas Petrovich told his mother, "We belong to different generations" (Letwin 1978, p. 64). In contrast, Trollope portrays a father-son relationship 'in which there is considerable disagreement and sometimes open conflict, and nevertheless respect, understanding, and harmony as well as love':

Father and son are not two opposed forces fated to collide. Their relations are far more intricate and constantly changing as the son grows older and the father thinks again. They are continually reinterpreting and responding to one another's conduct. (Letwin 1978, p. 68)

If the conflicts that Trollope depicts might have 'a different outcome' in other families, concludes Letwin, 'in Trollope's world it is not because of any "gap" between the generations, but because the people at odds with each other are more unreasonable or do not have in common the gentleman's respect for integrity and individuality'. Just how it is that gentlemen come to live together despite their differences 'cannot be predicted', but 'there is neither fixity nor much danger of violent breaks in the relations between young and old, because the agreement that is wanted and given is at a highly abstract level, and compatible therefore with an infinite variety in concrete performances' (Letwin 1978, p. 70).

## **2.5 Generation theory in the twentieth century**

Jaeger (1985) contends that it was only at the beginning of the nineteenth century that '[a] strong interest in the succession of generations as it might be relevant for social and cultural-historical phenomena manifested itself' (p.274), in the writings of European thinkers including Goethe, Schlegel, Ranke, Comte, Dromel, Ferrari, Dilthey, and Lorenz. By the twentieth century, he explains:

A regular flow of relevant publications began in 1920 with the voluminous dissertation by François Mentré, which tried to use successive generations in a family as a paradigm to explain the succession of cultural traditions in society. Works by the philosopher of culture Jose Ortega y Gasset, by the art historian

Wilhelm Pinder, the sociologist Karl Mannheim, the historian of music Alfred Lorenz (a son of Ottokar Lorenz), by the historian Hans v. Muller, the student of romance languages Eduard Wechsler, the literary historians Friedrich Kummer, Richard Alewyn, and Julius Petersen, by the classicist Engelbert Drerup, and the biologist Walter Scheidt, to mention only the most important followed in quick succession. (Jaeger 1985, p. 277)

Jaeger's list of key generational thinkers accords with those highlighted throughout the literature, although it notably exempts Heidegger, whose statement, in his theory of phenomenology, that 'The inescapable fate of living in and with one's generation completes the full drama of individual human existence' is widely quoted elsewhere (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), cited in Mannheim 1952, p. 282). Spitzer (1973) includes in his review of generational analysis Eisenstadt's 1956 book *From Generation to Generation*, and Julián Marías's *Generations: An Historical Method* (1970).

In discussing the history of the idea of 'generational difference', Kriegal (1978) argues that '[i]n the beginning, it was only the simple recognition of a demographic fact', with generation meaning 'the time that sons needed to become fathers'; but 'by Littré's definition in 1863, it became the *cohort* – the sum of all men of flesh and blood who make up the abstract thickness of time this carved out'. It is only at the turn of the twentieth century, she contends, that 'the generational rift intrudes into social practice and is transformed from a primitive means of accounting into one of the tools for decoding social reality' (Kriegal 1978, p. 23).

Bengston, Furlong and Laufer (1974) provide a useful and influential overview of 'themes and issues in generational analysis'. In addressing 'the "classical" perspective', they distinguish between Mannheim's (1952) approach, concerned with the 'historical consciousness of age-groups', and the 'structural-functional' perspective of Parsons (1963) and Eisenstadt (1956) (Bengston, Furlong and Laufer 1974, pp. 4-5). The latter perspective is considered to focus on socialisation in relation to the '*continuation* of the social order', while the former tends to be employed in theories 'concerned with social *change*' (Pilcher 1994, p. 484, emphasis in original). Mannheim's contribution is significant because of the role it ascribes to agency: active



‘generation units’ that are both the product of their social and historical circumstances and play an active role in shaping the *Zeitgeist*, or spirit of the age. Mannheim’s essay ‘has often been described as the seminal theoretical treatment of generations as a sociological phenomenon’ (Pilcher 1994, p. 481), from which ‘[m]odern empirical studies of generations proceed’ (Spitzer 1973, p. 1354). Due to the significance of Mannheim’s essay to the sociology of generations, the sociology of knowledge, and the ‘re-awakened’ interest in generations in the present day (Edmunds and Turner 2005, p. 559; White 2013), much of this chapter and Chapter 3 are devoted to an account of the problem of generations as Mannheim considered it.

### **2.5.1 Mannheim’s Problem of Generations**

Mannheim’s work on ‘The Problem of Generations’ provides an example of both the importance of situating theory within the time and place of its genesis, and the capacity of such theory to transcend the confines of its particular era. He begins Part One of this essay by noting that ‘[t]wo approaches to the problem have been worked out in the past: a “positivist” and a “romantic-historical” one’ – schools that ‘represent two antagonistic types of attitudes towards reality’:

The methodological ideal of the Positivists consisted in reducing their problems to quantitative terms; they sought a quantitative formulation of factors ultimately determining human existence. The second school adopted a qualitative approach, firmly eschewing the clear daylight of mathematics, and introverting the whole problem. (Mannheim 1952, p. 276)

Mannheim situates these two schools of thought within quite definite national contexts. He argues that ‘[t]he rationalist positivism is a direct continuation of classical rationalism’, and that ‘the important contributors to the problem are for the most part French’ or have come under the French influence, and cites Comte, Cournot, J. Dromel, Mentré ‘and others outside Germany’ as examples (p. 228). In Germany, however, the problem of generations ‘took on a specifically “German” character when Dilthey tackled it’, bringing out ‘the sudden re-emergence, in revised form, of problems and categories which in their original, romantic-historicist setting helped found the social and historical sciences in Germany’. Indeed, Mannheim argues:

It would be difficult to find better proof of the thesis that ways of formulating problems and modes of thought differ from country to country and from epoch to epoch, depending on dominant political trends, than the contrasting solutions offered to our problem in the various countries at different times. (Mannheim 1952, p. 280)

In Mannheim's account, the positivist type of thought that prevailed in France derived 'directly from the tradition of the Enlightenment', dominating both the natural and cultural sciences, and inspiring progressive/oppositional and Conservative/traditionalist groups alike. In Germany, 'the position was just the reverse – the romantic and historical schools supported by a strong conservative impulse always held sway', '[o]nly the natural sciences were able to develop in a positivist tradition' and 'positivism gained ground only sporadically, in so far as from time to time it was sponsored by oppositional groups'. The antithesis between these two schools of thought 'provided rallying points in the struggle which was conducted round practically every logical category; and the problem of generations itself constituted merely one stage in the development of this much wider campaign' (Mannheim 1952, pp. 280-281).

Mannheim thus presents the antithesis between 'French positivism and German romanticism' in its wider context, in order to understand it 'in relation to the narrower problem of generations'. For the 'liberal positivist type', the problem of generations 'serves above all as evidence in favour of its unilinear conception of progress':

This type of thought, arising out of modern liberal impulses, from the outset adopted a mechanised, externalised concept of time, and attempted to use it as an objective measure of unilinear progress by virtue of its expressibility in quantitative terms. Even the succession of generations was considered as something which articulated rather than broke the unilinear continuity of time. The most important thing about generations from this point was that they constituted one of the essential driving forces of progress. (Mannheim 1952, p. 281)

Mannheim's critique of the Positivist approach to generations is based upon what he sees as an overly-mechanical approach, which emphasises known data and perceived patterns or rhythms at the expense of understanding the interaction between human beings and wider social forces (pp. 276-7). The 'romantic and historicist German mind', on the other hand, challenges the Positivist concept of progress by 'relying on data furnished by a conservative technique of observation' and pointing to the problem of generations 'precisely as evidence against the concept of unilinear development in history... The problem of generations is seen here as the problem of the existence of an interior time that cannot be measured but only experienced in purely qualitative terms' (p. 281).

Mannheim dissects the work of Dilthey, Heidegger and Pinder in order to draw out the limitations of this 'introverted' approach, and to develop his own dynamic theory of generations, which engages with the objective reality made knowable by the Positivists through an appreciation of the subjective factor in shaping the *Zeitgeist*, or 'spirit of the age'. As he argues, '[i]ntellectual and cultural history is surely shaped, among other things, by social relations in which men get originally confronted with each other, by groups within which they find mutual stimulus, where concrete struggle produces entelechies and thereby also influences and to a large extent shapes art, religion, and so on' (p. 285). Thus, Mannheim concludes Part One of his essay by appreciating the importance of both the natural and the social in understanding the problem of generations:

Any biological rhythm must work itself out through the medium of social events: and if this important group of formative factors is left unexamined, and everything is derived directly from vital factors, all the fruitful potentialities in the original formulation of the problem are liable to be jettisoned in the manner of its solution. (Mannheim 1952, p. 286)

The particular ways in which Mannheim works through the relationship between generations and wider 'social events' are discussed in Chapter 3, with particular reference to his concept of 'generation units', and the role he ascribes to generational agency. In recent years there has, as Edmunds and Turner (2005) suggest, been an apparent revival of interest in Mannheim's theory, as 'social generations' are offered as

a frame through which to understand the development of consciousness and agency along alternative lines to class, race and sex – the cleavages that preoccupied social scientists through much of the twentieth century. It is in this vein that Edmunds and Turner (2002a) contend, ‘History is the history of the consciousness of strategic, active generations’ (p. x).

### **2.5.2 Ortega and the ‘pulse-rate hypothesis’**

The present-day interest in generations has also led to a revival of other theories, both those developed by contemporaries of Mannheim and those developed in America in the post-war period. A noteworthy contribution during the interwar period was provided by the Spanish thinker José Ortega y Gasset, whose ‘major analysis of the generation problem came last in a series of generational theories produced during the first three decades of the twentieth century, almost fifteen years after Mentré’s, seven years after Pinder’s, and five years after Mannheim’s’ (Wohl 1980, p. 154). Ortega attempted to draw up a strict structure of generations, in cohorts of 15 years, according to their relationship with particular epochs. ‘His recipe,’ explains Dobson (1989), was ‘to identify a period when human life radically changed, and then to isolate the decisive generation by isolating the decisive individual (or individuals) of the period’ (p. 175). Jaeger (1985) usefully describes this naturalised view of generational cycles as a ‘pulse-rate hypothesis’, whose adherents ‘search for the regularities of the universal rhythm of generations’, in contrast to the ‘imprint hypothesis’ whose adherents ‘search for (mostly social-historical and sociological) causal factors of generational change’ (pp. 280-281).

Of all the theories that have ‘attempted to make history intelligible through the prisms of generations,’ writes Dobson (1989), ‘Ortega’s theory is generally recognised as being the most extreme (some would say outlandish) of them all’. ‘This is principally,’ he explains, ‘because its imposition of biological rhythms on socio-historical phenomena is absolute and universal, whereas less ambitious theories have held that generations of thought are produced within the historical process as a whole’ (Dobson 1989, p. 176). The academic literature indicates that Mannheim’s approach, which considers generations as both the product *and producers* of their historical moment, has enjoyed far greater respect and influence.

However, it is worth noting that the work of the American writers William Strauss and Neil Howe, which takes the ‘pulse-rate’ hypothesis to an extreme conclusion, has been influential in the grey literature of the past two decades. Their 1991 book *Generations* presents a cyclical analysis to offer ‘the history of America’s future, 1584 to 2069’; while their 1997 book *The Fourth Turning* describes itself as ‘an American prophecy’: ‘What the cycles of history tell us about America’s next rendezvous with destiny’. As indicated in subsequent chapters, Neil Howe’s work with international policy organisations situates him as an influential claimmaker in the construction of the Baby Boomer problem in the USA, and certain motifs drawn from Strauss and Howe’s deterministic analysis have become more widely shared in the British discourse. Other naturalistic theories of the problem of generations, particularly those drawn from demography, have enjoyed prominence in the academic and grey literature of the postwar period; these are discussed in Chapter 5.

### **2.5.3 ‘The Generation of 1914’**

Mannheim in the 1920s asked ‘Why precisely is it that in most recent times people have become conscious of generational unity?’ (Wohl 1980, caption for centre pages). The surge in ‘generationalism’ during the interwar period is the subject of Robert Wohl’s (1980) masterful historical account of *The Generation of 1914*. Wohl examines the development of the generation question in France, Germany, England, Spain and Italy during this period, which took significantly different forms, yet contained a common ‘conscious[ness] of generational unity’ that distinguished the period from any era before or afterwards. The common link, suggests Wohl, is that ‘the intellectuals of the war generation’ saw themselves as “wanderers between two worlds” – a time of great crisis, bringing an urgent sense of destruction and also renewal (Wohl 1980; see also Furedi 2014).

This sense of the old world having been shattered, generating an uncertain new world, provided the foundation for ‘generation’ as a force that transcended old allegiances. Wohl writes:

The 'generation of 1914' was... first of all a self-image produced by a clearly-defined group within the educated classes at a particular moment in the evolution of European society. It was both an attempt at self-description by intellectuals and a project of hegemony over other social classes that derived its credibility and its force from circumstances that were unique to European men born during the last decades of the nineteenth century. (Wohl 1980: 209)

The 'formidable wave of generational thinking during the first few decades of the twentieth century', which led to the 'self-image' of the Generation of 1914, resulted, explains Wohl, from the convergence of a number of pre-existing trends: 'The nineteenth-century tradition of the young generation as the vanguard of cultural and political change, the emergence of youth as a clearly defined and demographically significant social group, its organization, and a growing sense of collective historical destiny' (Wohl 1980, p. 208, p. 207).

It is worth noting the emergence, within this discussion of the 'Generation of 1914', of a number of ideas that continue to inform the problem of generations throughout the twentieth century, and influence the construction of the Baby Boomers as a social problem in the twenty-first. First, we see the coalescence of generation with an intellectual impulse, which appears to operate 'above' the distinctions of social class. This also informed an important element of Mannheim's account of the role played by *hommes de lettres* in the construction of the *Zeitgeist*, and speaks to the extent to which generational consciousness is seen to be situated within, or expressed by, the 'educated classes' (Wohl 1980, p. 209; see also Edmunds and Turner 2002a). Second, a focus on youth as the basis for self-definition and solidarity prefigures the emergence, in post-war Britain and America, of a more explicit discussion about the extent to which class conflict was being displaced, or surpassed, by conflict on 'status grounds' (Goertzel 1972). In the postwar period, movements oriented around youth are sometimes perceived, like those organised around race and sex, as encapsulating an alternative to class politics. These two points are elaborated below, and in Chapter 6.

A third, and related, idea pertains to the understanding of generation in relation to 'European men' (Wohl 1980, p. 209). Generational agency, like political agency, has been largely conceived as a project of men, reflecting the historical reality of

periods in which women were excluded from public life. In recent decades, however, challenges have emerged to this framework, both at the level of sociological critique (see Edmunds and Turner 2002a, 2002b, 2005), and because of wider structural changes, such as women's position in society. Chapter 6 indicates that media discussion about the Baby Boomer generation recognises, both explicitly and implicitly, that women play an important role in establishing this generation as distinct from its forebears; and we can suggest that, while the history of generations has been dominated by men, the present-day construction of the problem is one that includes women.

#### **2.5.4 Focus on youth**

The emergence of generation theory in the twentieth century often took the form of a focus on youth as a distinct social phenomenon. This is central to the analysis offered by Eisenstadt (1963), who notes that in primitive and traditional societies, 'the transition from youth to adulthood is not organized in specific age groups but is largely effected within the fold of the family and kinship groups', providing 'a close and comprehensive linkage between personal temporal transition and societal or cosmic time, a linkage most fully expressed in the *rites de passage*' (p. 34). In such societies, the transition from childhood to adulthood 'is given full meaning in terms of ultimate cultural values and symbols borne or symbolized by various adult role models'. In modern society, however, this picture 'greatly changes': '[t]he youth group, whatever its composition or organization, usually stands alone', and 'the social organization and self-expression of youth are not given full legitimation or meaning in terms of cultural values and rituals'.

Eisenstadt views the consequent weakening of the 'close linkage between the growth of personality, psychological maturation, and definite role models derived from the adult world' as problematic, as the 'coalescence of youth into special groups only tends to emphasize their problematic, uncertain standing from the point of view of cultural values and symbols' (pp. 34-35). This, in turn, creates among adolescents 'a great potential uncertainty and ambivalence toward to the adult world'; manifest, 'on the one hand, in a striving to communicate with the adult world and receive its recognition; on the other hand, it appears in certain dispositions to accentuate the

differences between them and the adults and to oppose the various roles allocated to them by the adults'. Such ambivalence is also to be found 'in the ideologies of modern youth groups', most of which 'tend to create an ideology that emphasizes the discontinuity between youth and adulthood and the uniqueness of the youth period as the purest embodiment of ultimate social and cultural values' (p. 35).

Gillis (1974) defines the period between 1900 and 1950 as the 'era of adolescence', when 'simultaneously in almost every western country, the concept of adolescence was democratized, offered to, or rather required of, all the teenaged' (p. 133). This shift was justified by '[s]ocial and psychological theories of the instability of the age-group', which resulted in 'a deluge of protective legislation' that excluded teenagers from the job market and 'simultaneously cloister[ed] them in the expanding sector of secondary education' (Gillis 1974, p.133; Gillis 1973, p. 249). Also at that time, 'a whole set of extracurricular organizations, including sports clubs, youth hostels, and other age-graded activities, came into existence', exemplified, in Gillis's analysis, by the Boy Scouts in England and the *Wandervogel* in Germany (Gillis 1973, p. 249). While these organisations were very different in appearance, Gillis contends that their similarities lay in the reproduction of contemporary anxieties about generational conflict and the socialisation of youth:

Both were middle class in their values, sharing certain common attitudes toward youth's place in the economy, the polity, and the social order. In both, the role assigned to the young was essentially that of political passivity and social dependence, the norm of adolescence that was becoming ever more widespread at the beginning of this century. (Gillis 1973, p. 251)

The German youth movement continually emerges in the literature as a concern in the early sociology of generations, including the work of Mannheim. Laqueur's (1962) historical study situates the German Youth Movement against the backdrop of 'unprecedented economic and technical progress' combined with 'serious symptoms of cultural decline' (p. 3). Karl (1970) explains that the *Jugendbewegung* 'describes a complex phenomenon', which can be understood as 'the crystallization of youth's striving for its own group identity in Germany, from the beginnings of the *Wandervogel* movement in about 1900 into the state-controlled youth movement in



1933, and again in the youth groups and associations which emerged after the war' (pp. 121-2). This movement, contends Karl, had its origins in a broader sense of discontent and a desire to change social norms.

Marwick's influential study of 'Detachment and Commitment' in British youth between 1920 and 1960, begins with the assertion: 'However we may define "youth", it is clear that as a political and cultural phenomenon it makes its first significant appearance on the British scene in the 1920s' (Marwick 1970, pp. 37-39).

Marwick uses term to denote 'young adult' and focuses on 'the turning towards, and the turning away from, active politics on the part of articulate, self-conscious youth, a small minority at any time in the total age-group', and makes an important observation regarding his focus on students:

[Y]outh and "intellectuals" are not synonymous; yet a clear correlation does emerge between the main tides of intellectual opinion in this period, and what youth is doing and saying, suggesting that some guidance from above, be it from a Marcuse or a D.H. Lawrence, is nearly always necessary to crystallise youthful opinion. (Marwick 1970, pp. 38-39)

Marwick characterises the 1920s, following a brief flurry of interest in left-wing politics at the end of the war, as a time of 'detachment': 'By 1922-3 "youth" has come to connote, not so much leftist politics, as hiking, nudism, and all the other things associated with the swinging Weimar Republic' (p. 39). In the middle and later twenties, 'the voice of articulate youth ... is the voice of despair: the only life-line to hope – and this is the thread which runs through the interwar years, to become a rope in the thirties – is a vague belief in internationalism, an equally vague repudiation of war' (p. 42). This accords with Wohl's (1980) account of the self-consciously 'lost generation', associated with the First World War poets, Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, and Siegfried Sassoon.

In Marwick's account, '[t]he great crisis of 1930-2 affected the youth movements as it affected British intellectuals: nudism gave way to Marxism, the free-floating international soul was replaced by a national conscience strongly aware of local economic and social evils'; and 'in the period of "commitment" left-wing splinter

groups proliferated, finally to be exposed in all their youthful fatuity by the test of the second world war'. He continues:

Only in the fifties, when those born on the eve of the second world war reached university age, did another distinctive image of youth appear: a new kind of detachment which drew its sustenance from the fashionable literature of the time, the product of those writers approaching early middle age known as the 'angry young men' – such as Kingsley Amis, John Wain, and John Osborne. (Marwick 1970, p. 39)

Here, Marwick draws our attention to two key points relevant to this study of the Baby Boomers. First, the Second World War (like the First World War) acted as something of a watershed in generation theory. Second, both the interest in generations, and the personalities seen to define these 'angry young men', were in fact 'writers approaching early middle age'. This point is equally pertinent to the present-day understanding of the ideas associated with the 'Sixties generation': without discounting the reality of the 'youth' or 'student' movements of the Sixties, both the figureheads of these movements, and those writing about them, tend to be intellectuals who belong to an older generation.

However, when considering the discussion of generations in relation to intellectual currents and student groups, it is worth bearing in mind the caution exercised by Mannheim in looking at the relationship between the *Zeitgeist* and literary (or other cultural) works. *Hommes de lettres*, writes Mannheim (1952), constitute 'a social group of a very particular character': because they (and only they) exist as a relatively unattached group, which can 'vacillate, joining now one trend, now another'. This 'gives the impression that at one moment the "spirit of the age" is entirely romantic, and at the next entirely liberal-rationalist, and further that whether the spirit of the age is to be romantic or rationalist is exclusively determined by these literati-poets and thinkers', whereas: 'In actual fact ... the decisive impulses which determine the direction of social evolution do not originate with them at all, but with the much more compact, mutually antagonistic social groups which stand behind them, polarized into antagonistic trends' (Mannheim 1952, p. 317).

## 2.6 Generation theory in the postwar period

‘The twentieth century has two periods of intensive study of historical generations: the years between 1920 and 1933 and the period after the Second World War,’ explains Jaeger (1985). ‘During the first period, German contributions dominate in terms of numbers and importance. The second period shows a broad spectrum of international research, during which American studies, mostly social scientifically oriented, gain prominence’ (p. 277).

An understanding of the problem of generations in the twentieth century also involves a recognition of the way this discussion came to be shaped by social and cultural forces outside Europe: specifically, within North America, and the contributions of Talcott Parsons (1963) and S. N. Eisenstadt (1956, 1963). This point is addressed in Chapter 3, within a related discussion of the shift in the ‘home’ of the sociology of knowledge from Europe to America. Here it is simply important to note that the emergence of a competing framework for understanding the problem of generations has complicated the discussion. At the same time, the emergence of new types of social organisation described variously as ‘bureaucratisation’, ‘alienation’, or ‘post-industrial society’, alongside the decline of traditional social solidarities, ideological certainties and political movements (Bell 1960, 1972, 1976; Furedi 2005; Putnam 2000; Riesman 1966), have provided a context in which the problem of generations seems to acquire a renewed, and distinctive, interest.

The available literature on the problem of generations in the second half of the twentieth century confirms the American dominance, both in terms of the study of the problem within the American context and the way that the study of generations in Britain is informed by the American literature. While there are important differences in the social context of Britain and America, the literature reflects the growing cultural similarities between Britain and America in late modern society in terms of how social phenomena are both experienced and framed, and from this point it becomes possible to talk broadly of an ‘Anglo-American’ approach to the problem of generations.

It is worth noting the extent to which the literature reflects a preoccupation with generational conflict as a middle-class phenomenon. This focus on the ‘alienation’ of

middle-class youth becomes more pronounced in the 1950s and 1960s (Keniston 1963, 1971), and is seen to achieve a sharp expression in the student protests of the 1960s, which are internationalised (see Keniston and Lerner (1971) for a selection of references on the literature about ‘student protest’). The size of, and form taken by, the academic literature on these protests can in many respects be seen as the first stage in constructing the ‘Baby Boomer’ problem. I return to the vast body of literature about the student protests in Chapter 6, to analyse the construction of the Baby Boomers as a cultural problem.

### **2.6.1 The Fifties: ‘Silent’ generations and the problem of ‘over-conformity’**

The backdrop to the formulation of the problem of generations in the second half of the twentieth century was a set of anxieties bound up with the sense that the developed world was undergoing a shift from being a modern, industrial society, to becoming a post-modern, post-industrial society. Such trends were not fully developed in the immediate post-war period: however, much of the literature written at that time clearly engages with concerns that would later be categorised as part of the distinct problem of late modernity. For example, David Riesman’s influential book *The Lonely Crowd: A study of the changing American character* was first published in 1950, and was premised on the idea that the world’s advanced countries (America in particular) were at the beginning of a ‘revolution – a whole range of social developments associated with a shift from an age of production to an age of consumption’ (Riesman 1961, p. 6).

For Riesman, a key component of this shift was to do with changing demographics – America had become a society of ‘incipient population decline’, which ‘develops in its typical members a social character whose conformity is insured by their tendency to be sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others’ – leading to the creation of ‘*other-directed* people’ and societies ‘*dependent on other-direction*’ (Riesman 1961, p. 8). The impact of changes in population size and distribution between birth cohorts formed an important element of the literature on generations from this period. For example, two influential accounts from a demographic perspective were Davis’s (1940) article ‘The Sociology of Parent-Youth Conflict’ and Ryder’s (1965) article ‘The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change’. Despite their grounding in a naturalistic understanding, both articles contain a number

of important descriptive insights into the working through of generational conflict, both within the family and in wider society, and, like Riesman's work, are cited by numerous scholars across the disciplines.

Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (2008 [1973]) and *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) provided a different conceptual framework to Riesman's 'revolution', based on his hypothesis that 'technology (including intellectual technology) and the codification of theoretical knowledge as a new principle for innovation and policy were reshaping the techno-economic order, and with it, the stratification of society as well' (Bell 1976, p. xi). However, both explanations share some key elements, to do with the perception of a relationship between changing methods of production and forms of social organisation, and the effect this has on individual development. Riesman views this shift through the development of a different 'character type', while Bell analyses it in terms of the 'cultural contradictions of capitalism', where three distinct social realms 'are ruled by contrary axial principles: for the economy, efficiency; for the polity, equality; and for the culture, self-realization (or self-gratification)' (Bell 1976, pp. xi-xii).

The widespread concern about how individuals manage the conflict between the structures of late modern society and the cultural norms and ideals that it generates lies beneath much of the literature on generations written during the post-war period. Eisenstadt (1963) examines the disjuncture between the ideals of youth movements and the realities of the adult world, against which such movements are reacting. In general, he writes, youth groups 'are associated with a breakdown of traditional settings, the onset of modernization, secularization, and industrialization'; and 'the more intensive types of youth groups tend to develop in those societies and periods in which the onset of modernization is connected with great upheavals and sharp cleavages in the social structure and the structure of authority and with the breakdown of symbols of collective authority' (Eisenstadt 1963, p. 39). As modernisation progresses and 'broad masses' are absorbed within the framework of society, he writes, the aims and values of youth movements are 'institutionalized', as 'part of a wider process of institutionalizing various collective values'. These processes have 'several important results', the first of which is that:

The possibility of linking personal transition both to social groups and cultural values... has become greatly weakened. The social and even sometimes the cultural dimension of the future may thus become flattened and emptied. The various collective values have been transformed. Instead of being remote goals resplendent with romantic dreams, they have become mundane objectives of the present, with its shabby details of daily politics and administration. More often than not they are intimately connected with the processes of bureaucratization. (Eisenstadt 1963, pp. 39-40)

These 'mutations', argues Eisenstadt, are not distinct to youth; they are associated with a decline in ideology 'among many groups and strata in modern societies, with a general flattening of political-ideological motives and a growing apathy to them' – which is in turn connected to the 'spiritual or cultural shallowness' of the social and economic benefits administered by the welfare state, as a result of which 'we observe the emptiness and meaninglessness of social relations, so often described by critics of the age of consumption and mass society'. He continues:

In general, these developments have brought about the flattening of the image of the societal future and have deprived it of its allure. Between present and future there is no ideological discontinuity. The present has become the more important, if not the more meaningful, because the future has lost its characteristic as a dimension different from the present. Out of these conditions has grown what Riesman has called the cult of immediacy. Youth has been robbed, therefore, of the full experience of the dramatic transition from adolescence to adulthood and of the dramatization of the difference between present and future. Their own changing personal future has become dissociated from any changes in the shape of their societies or in cultural activities and values. (Eisenstadt 1963, pp. 40-41)

Eisenstadt notes a 'paradox', that these developments have 'often been connected with a strong adulation of youth – an adulation, however, which was in a way purely instrumental'. Nonetheless, he ends on a self-consciously optimistic note: 'the impact on youth of what has been called postindustrial society need not result in such an emptiness and shallowness, although in recent literature these effects appear large

indeed', because the changes he has identified, 'together with growing abundance and continuous technological change, have necessarily heightened the possibility of greater personal autonomy and cultural creativity and of the formation of the bases of such autonomy and of a flexible yet stable identity during the period of youth. Such developments, in turn:

... have created the possibility of youth's developing what may be called a nonideological, direct identification with moral values, an awareness of the predicaments of moral choice that exist in any given situation, and individual responsibility for such choices – a responsibility that cannot be shed by relying on overarching ideological solutions oriented to the future. (Eisenstadt 1963, p. 41)

Eisenstadt's attempt to describe 'Archetypal Patterns of Youth' intersects with the wider themes and tensions addressed by the literature on the study of generations in the 1950s and early 1960s. His chapter appears in Erikson's (1963) edited collection *Youth: Change and Challenge*, the other contributions to which indicate the kind of preoccupations that informed much discussion within the social sciences, and the span of disciplines and perspectives that were engaged. Thus, alongside Parsons's functionalist discussion of 'Youth in the Context of American Society', Erikson's chapter on 'Youth: Fidelity and Diversity' and Bruno Bettelheim's chapter on 'The Problem of Generations' offer psychological, or psychosocial, perspectives on the problem. Goldberg's contribution, 'Technology Sets New Tasks', and Denney's reflections on 'American Youth Today: A Bigger Cast, a Wider Screen', speak to the anxieties about technology and the economy bound up with the emergence of 'post-industrial society'. Keniston's chapter on 'Social Change and Youth in America' offers a more self-consciously radical psychosocial approach, also emphasising rapid social change (indeed, his chapter is re-published in Keniston's 1971 book with the title 'The Speed-up of Change'), while other studies of youth in the US South, postwar Japan, France, and the Soviet Union reflect an awareness of the differential experiences of young people both within America and outside it, and the existence of societies organised along lines other than the Anglo-American, modern capitalist model.

From the relevant literature published over the period broadly recognised as ‘The Fifties’, we can identify two core concerns. The first is that of apathy, or ‘over-conformity’, linked to a consciousness of rapid social change within the Western world and the growing disenchantment with the kind of social alternative embodied in the Soviet Union. This raises in stark form the tension between continuity and change, and focuses on questions of agency, both at the individual and the collective level. The second core theme relates to sexual relations, questions of adult identity, and anxieties around the apparent emergence of a new ‘character type’.

### 2.6.2 The absence of a Cause

The generation that came of age in the Fifties has been characterised as the ‘Silent generation’ (see discussion in Strauss and Howe 1991). In both Britain and America at the time, this ‘silence’ was perceived as a rather troubling phenomenon. ‘The ideal of adolescence that generations of schoolmasters and youth workers had labored to perfect seemed complete in the tranquil 1950s; yet, even then, there were adults who were troubled by this, their own creation,’ explains Gillis (1974). ‘The notion of a period of life freed from the responsibilities of adulthood was too easily distorted by the more restive members of the younger generation into the frightening image of the rebel without a cause. And if rising rates of delinquency were not enough to give second thoughts, there was also the realization that even the more benign features of adolescence, including its political passivity and social conformity, mirrored other well-known weaknesses of adult society’ Gillis 1974, p. 185).

The rebellion of the Fifties is widely acknowledged to have taken place on the cultural level, through the Beats in the USA and the ‘Angry Young Men’ in Britain, including Kingsley Amis, John Osborne, and Alan Sillitoe. As David Marquand observed in the first issue of *Universities and Left Review*, launched, according to Marwick (1970) as ‘a riposte to detachment’:

Writers and young men at universities have always been bitter about the smugness of bourgeois life... Bitterness against the drab monotony of Welfare State Britain is commonplace... Bitterness against the cynicism and vulgarity of the *nouveaux riches* is again commonplace... But all these bitteresses are not



usually found together and especially not with the last: bitterness against the lack of a Cause. In fact, what these angry young men are most angry about is that they have nothing on which to focus their anger. (Cited in Marwick 1970, p. 50)

The central political development that accounted for ‘the lack of a Cause’ in the 1950s was the growing disillusionment with the outcome of the Russian revolution.

‘Communism in Russia involved far more than a parochial national revolution that failed,’ writes Keniston (1971). ‘It was an attempt, like that of the French revolution, to create a world in which men would be free not only from the tyrannies of want and power, but from the oppressions of their social and economic order – an attempt to make concrete the spiritual promises of Christianity. Its failure has been a tragedy for the entire West, one that has materially undermined our declining faith in our capacity to improve our world’ (Keniston 1971, p. 44).

The absence of an alternative to capitalism loomed large in postwar Britain and America, with the Holocaust a traumatic recent memory and the Cold War a current and terrifying reality (Lasch 1984, Furedi 2014). In the literature following this period, the combination of technology, rapid social change and the destructive potential of military and political power are perceived to forge a distinct generational consciousness. ‘No longer is our anxiety focused primarily upon the teen-ager, upon the adolescent of Hall’s day,’ writes Keniston (1971). ‘Today we are nervous about the new “dangerous classes” – those young men and women of college- and graduate-school age who can’t seem to “settle down” the way their parents did, who refuse to consider themselves adult, and who often vehemently challenge the existing social order. “Campus unrest”, according to a June, 1970, Gallup Poll, was considered the nation’s *main* problem’ (p. 5). He continues:

The factors that have brought this new group into existence parallel in many ways the factors that produced adolescence: rising prosperity, the further prolongation of education, the enormously high educational demands of a postindustrial society. And behind these measurable changes lie other trends less quantitative but even more important: a rate of social change so rapid that it threatens to make obsolete all institutions, values, methodologies, and

technologies within the lifetime of each generation; a technology that has created not only prosperity and longevity, but power to destroy the planet, whether through warfare or violation of nature's balance; a world of extraordinarily complex social organization, instantaneous communication, and constant revolution. The 'new' young men and young women emerging today both reflect and react against these trends. (Keniston 1971, p. 5)

Contributions from a very different perspective endorsed this account of the important and disruptive role of technology. For the demographer Norman B. Ryder (1965), technological innovation is, in Ryder's account, the 'principal motor of contemporary social change', displacing generational continuity. Technology 'pervades the other substructures of society and forces them into accommodation,' he writes. 'The modern society institutionalizes this innovation and accepts it as self-justifying. To the child of such a society, technological change makes the past irrelevant' (Ryder 1965, p. 851). All the factors outlined here – prosperity, technology, disenchantment, destruction, conformity and rising unrest – formed the ingredients of the 'Baby Boomer problem' as it first emerged in the 1960s.

### **2.6.3 The Sixties: 'Students Protest'**

The material reviewed above indicates that, by the 1950s, Anglo-American society was already preoccupied with the problem of generations: specifically, in the form of the problem of an over-conformist, apathetic youth. One theme that clearly emerges is the difficulty in separating the theorisation of generations from the social, political and cultural context that gave rise to an interest in them. This is particularly clear in the notable shift that took place during the 1960s, from a concern about the apathetic, consumerist, conformist teenager (Mays 1961, Gillis 1974) and the disaffection of the 'Beat' generation (Marwick 1970), to a focus on the alienated, radical student and the birth of the politics of the 'New Left'. These concerns are led by the American literature but reflected in the more limited British discussion. Chapters 5 and 6 examine more closely this process of diffusion, and highlight some of the important differences between the two societies, which are occasionally – though not always – accounted for in the literature and the cultural script developed through the British media.

There is an explosion of interest in generations at the end of the 1960s and over the 1970s, much of which appears as a direct response to the student protest movement that took over university campuses in America and some European countries. A sample of this literature is indicated by Keniston and Lerner (1971), and also revealed through the publication of a number of themed special issues of journals, including:

- *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1969) 382 'Protest in the Sixties';
- *Journal of Contemporary History* (1970) 5(1) 'Generations in Conflict';
- *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1971) 395 'Students Protest';
- *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1974) 415 'Political Consequences of Aging';
- *Journal of Social Issues* (1974) 30(2) and 30 (3) are devoted to a discussion of 'Youth, Generations and Social Change';
- *Daedalus* (1978) 107(4) 'Generations'.

This literature is referred to in Chapter 6, as an integral part of an analysis of the construction of the Baby Boomers as a cultural problem. As Braungart (1974) notes, '[t]hroughout the 1960s, a number of theories have been employed to explain youth politics', including theories of class consciousness, status politics, oedipal revolt, family socialization, moralism, critical mass, and university size (pp. 34-35). Braungart goes on to note that the 'generational conflict theory' has received particular attention over the previous decade, although there 'remains widespread criticism over its interpretation and support', and discusses Goertzel's (1972) attempt to 'compare the generational argument in terms of its two major competing propositions': the 'structural-functional' approach presented by Parsons (1963) and Eisenstadt (1963), and the 'historical consciousness or generational unit model originally developed by Mannheim (1952)'. Braungart continues:

The functionalist argument implies that society operates as an interrelated and integrated social system; but when the institutional components fail to mesh or

balance, alienation and rebellion are likely to occur. The generational unit argument, on the other hand, suggests that social change is rooted not in social disequilibrium but in the emerging consciousness of youth movements within generations. (Braungart 1974, p. 35).

Braungart's summary indicates the extent to which the literature of the late 1960s and early 1970s conceptualised the problem of generations overwhelmingly as one of youth rebellion, and established Mannheim's theory as an expression of agency, in contrast to the focus on *anomie* presented by Parsons and Eistenstadt. The special issues of journals focused on the student protests indicates the disproportionate impact that campus protests had on the academic discussion of generational conflict in general. This can be explained in part by the fact that the academy was the focus for many of these protests, spurring a direct engagement from academics on the receiving end or playing a supportive role; but it also speaks to the emergence of student radicals as the dominant 'generation unit' of this period.

In the USA and throughout Europe, where protests reverberated around the campuses, students represented a minority of the younger generation, and those involved in the protests a tiny minority of those (Marwick 1999: 480; Thomas 2002, Whalen and Flacks 1989). Yet in terms of the *construction* of the problem of generations over this period, the student protest movement had a major impact, in part because of the extent to which it fused the ideas of the New Left (and its intellectual figureheads, such as the rather older Herbert Marcuse) with a sense that agency could be expressed through generation, rather than through class. In this regard, the orientation of radical politics away from the material and towards the psychological and cultural, and the orientation of radical agency away from the working class and towards the intelligentsia, is an important factor in the significance of the student protest movement.

The role apparently played by the student protest movement over this period can be understood with reference to Mannheim's theoretical approach, which sought to understand the role of generations, and also of intellectuals, in the wider process of social change (Mannheim 1936, 1952). This approach is discussed in detail by Edmunds and Turner (2002a), in their attempt to 'demonstrate the value of generations

over class in understanding cultural, intellectual and national change in the twentieth century' (p. 21). Writing at the turn of the twenty-first century, Edmunds and Turner (2002a) note 'mounting evidence' that the 'post-war generation' – to which they also refer as the sixties generation, and the baby boomer generation – 'by virtue of its size and its strategic position, has been particularly critical to social change in the twentieth century' (p. 115). In the literature of the early 1970s, we can see this argument begin to emerge.

Goertzel's (1972) article on 'Generational Conflict and Social Change' poses a striking statement about the extent to which generational consciousness came to be considered, by some, as a replacement for class consciousness. Stating that Mannheim's 'historical-consciousness theory' provides 'a framework for isolating the significance of generational differences for social change', and that '[t]he long-run implications of generational differences can be specified from this perspective', Goertzel conceded that 'it is difficult to say what role generational conflict will play in political affairs in the immediate future'. However:

Students and other young people in modern society differ from their elders in that they have been socialized in a period of relative affluence brought about by science, technology, and bureaucracy. Just as Marx predicted, this affluence, which was generated by modern society, has also planted the seeds of the destruction of that society, or at least the radical transformation of it. The leading agency of that transformation, however, is not likely to be the industrial proletariat, which has been coopted to a degree just sufficient to maintain its loyalty without satiating its desire for material goods. The more likely agencies of change are the young people and the middle-class professional people, for whom material rewards have lost their potency as rewards for conformity. (Goertzel 1972, p. 346)

Here, Goertzel draws attention to the characteristic element of youth protest and the counter-culture in the Sixties – its rhetorical rejection of 'material rewards'. With echoes of Marcuse (1966, 1969), he contends: 'Young people who question the ethic of modern capitalism which asserts that man must constantly devote himself to meeting the limitless artificial needs created by the advertising arm of technocracy are, in a

sense, urging a return to precapitalist values' (Goertzel 1972, pp. 337-8). In this view, the *Zeitgeist* is counter-cultural; but because of the 'special sensitivity which young people have to emerging social and cultural trends' (p. 335), youth becomes the agency that can transform this ideal into a force for 'social change'.

Abrams (1970) also notes young people's orientation towards pre-capitalist values, although he draws attention to the partial character of this generational movement. Observing that the thrust of political youth movements 'consists of a drive to de-institutionalize the existing adult world', he writes:

Sharing a rhetoric of social transformation with the wider social movements of which they are frequently part, their distinctive contribution has been ... to introduce essentially retrogressive themes in the guise of an appeal to universal social values. The forms of social organization they typically envisage are simple, direct, face-to-face, a reaffirmation of the world of kin, community, rural innocence and childhood. (Abrams 1970, p. 186)

From this Abrams points to a paradox: that 'age becomes important as a basis for social action in societies where it is ceasing to control access to social status'. How far 'the resulting cultural and political innovation on the part of the young will crop into movements of youth "for itself", movements actually articulating the idea of generational conflict, and how far the theme of generational conflict will "take" in the society at large', however, 'will depend in part on the extent to which particular groupings of young people are objectively victimized by the social system as well as being subjectively perplexed by it'; on 'the relative unavailability of other symbols of protest and solidarity'; and 'finally on the extent to which the society provides settings for interaction among numbers of young people which are at once concentrated geographically and relatively well insulated from the adult world - settings in which there is no one but the young and in which all the young share common predicaments, including exclusive relationships of subordination to adults, universities rather than factories therefore'. If 'the environment is favourable in all three of these respects the young are almost certain to redefine their experience in terms of a conflict of generations,' he argues (Abrams 1970, p. 187).

Abrams's observations draw attention to the way that the rise of generational conflict in the Sixties took place in the context of a wider unease about traditional institutions and authority relations, creating a 'favourable' environment to the sensibility of generational conflict. Chapter 6 discusses the way in which the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem is informed largely by the wider social and political shifts of the Sixties, which take on a generational form. As regards the position of youth within the wider counter-cultural moment of the Sixties, what emerges from literature of this time is a consciousness of an explicit attack on adult authority. 'Almost everywhere, in the second half of the 1960s, established decision-makers were challenged to justify themselves, especially to the younger generation,' write Moodie and Eustace (1974, p. 196), in their study of power and authority in British universities. Eisenstadt (1971) discusses this issue directly, as does Feuer's (1969) Oedipal theory of student protest movements, which frequently employs the concept of the 'de-authorization' of older generations.

The attack on adult authority was given a particular focus and intensity with the Vietnam war and, specifically, the draft. In echoes of the 'Generation of 1914', Vietnam spurred a youthful self-identity as a group destined for annihilation: in the words of Friedenberg (1969), 'a discriminated-against minority in America – more seriously so than any ethnic minority' (p. 32). The international character of the antiwar movement, organised in Britain through such new movements as the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) to the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) (Thomas 2002), suggested that what lay beneath the youthful reaction against the Vietnam war was not merely self-interest in the face of the draft, but a wider reaction against the exercise of power. This took the form of campaigns against the atomic bomb and American military power in Vietnam, but also formed the basis of popular intellectual currents of the time: Marcuse's (1966) attacks on the 'totalitarian' basis of contemporary industrial society, which 'operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests' (p. 3), and Mills's (1956) critique of 'The Power Elite'.

Furedi (2009, 2013, 2014) situates the questioning of adult authority within a more generalised crisis of authority; a point which reverberates through the literature of the Sixties student protest movements. This helps to account for the disproportionate influence of the student protests, both at the time and going forward. 'The dominant

culture turned out to be less monolithic and more permeable than many sixties youths had expected,' write Whalen and Flacks (1989), in their study of the lives of Sixties activists, 20 years on. 'Indeed, no aspect of mainstream life has been untouched by changes in culture and sensibility begun in the sixties' (p. 266). Marwick (1999) affirms that 'the consequences of what happens in the sixties were long-lasting: the sixties cultural revolution in effect established the enduring cultural values and social behaviour for the rest of the century' (p. 806).

## 2.7 Generation theory since the Sixties

The literature published during, and/or about, generational conflict in the Sixties dominates the sociology of generations. Since the 1970s, the intensity of interest has tended to disperse into different, albeit related, areas. For example, one significant consequence of the Sixties shift towards a focus on the 'politics of age' (Braungart 1984, Walker and Naegele 1999) has been the growth, from the 1970s onwards, of a substantial body of literature on the problem of 'ageing'. As I discuss in Chapter 5, the widespread acceptance that an ageing society is problematic, especially for younger generations, forms a powerful feature of the construction of the Baby Boomer as an economic problem in the present day.

An irony of this, which has been widely remarked upon both in the academic literature and in the newspaper articles on which this study is based, is that the Baby Boomers are culturally associated primarily with youthfulness – yet, as Marwick noted back in 1970, 'there is probably always one final sanction on the power of youth: the process of growing older' (Marwick 1970, p. 51). That the Boomers, emblematic of youthfulness, have now become the focus of contemporary society's anxiety about 'ageing' – expressed in publications such as Age Concern England's *Baby Boomers: Ageing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (Evandrou 1997), the Carnegie Corporation's *Our Aging Society: Paradox and promise* (Pifer and Bronte 1986), or Jacoby's (2011) *Never Say Die: The myth and marketing of the new old age* – is an indication of the contradictory agendas that are played out through the this discussion.

There is no scope in this thesis to review the vast literature about ageing. Nor is there scope to analyse in detail the large number of articles that have been published in



recent years, in a range of disciplines and from a range of geographical origins (most notably Britain, North America, Europe, and Australia), that have focused on some aspect of the Baby Boomer generation. I have not engaged with the various discussions about the generations that follow the Baby Boomers (most usually labelled ‘Generation X’, ‘Generation Y’, ‘Millennials’); and I have not reviewed the existing empirical studies of the lived experience of the Baby Boomer generation. All of these are worthwhile areas of study, about which there exists a fascinating body of literature.

However, it is worth noting here that some recent contributions to the British academic literature confirm that ‘generational thinking’ (White 2013, p. 217) may be attracting a new wave of intense interest. Pilcher’s (1995) work *Age and Generation in Modern Britain* brings together developments in the sociology of ageing with a discussion of social theories of age and generation. She highlights as an important development the ‘life course’ perspective associated with Hareven (2000), which ‘provides a way of conceptualizing an individual’s progress through life which is sensitive to the dynamic and cumulative nature of the ageing process, and its embedding in cultural and historical contexts’ (Pilcher 1995, pp. 21-22).

Pilcher’s observation that life course ‘has become increasingly influential as a way of studying the social significance of age’ seems to be born out at one end by the publication, in 1984, of a special issue of the *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* (12(1)) titled ‘Life Course and Generational Politics’, which revisited some of the discussions from the 1960s and 1970s; and at the other by the increasing use of the ‘life course’ concept in British health policy documents (see for example Department of Health 2013).

As noted above, ‘life course’ speaks to a more individualised approach to generations and ageing than either the historical consciousness approach associated with Mannheim, or the structural-functionalist model associated with Parsons and Eisenstadt. This approach has great value for analysing the experience of generations, where the nuances of life do not fall into the categories offered by a schematic generational analysis that focuses on cohorts. It also has much to offer in correcting the limitations of the life cycle approach:

Unlike the static, ages and stages, pre-ordered qualities suggested by the life cycle, the life course allows for flexibility and variation in stages reached, their timing and sequencing. (Pilcher 1995, p.17)

In subsequent chapters, I note the disjuncture between particular claims that are made about generational experience and the lived experience of individuals within these cohorts; and an empirical study of the Baby Boomer generation itself could usefully take the life course approach to understand the relationship between history, biography, social context and lived experience. However, from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge – the approach taken by this thesis – it is the different attempts to theorise generations that emerge as the most important to engage with.

As Edmunds and Turner (2005) argue, ‘various demographic, cultural and intellectual developments have re-awakened an interest in generations that started with the classic essay by Karl Mannheim’ (p. 559), and their own work provides an important contribution to the formulation of a sociology of generations in the light of these developments. Edmunds and Turner follow Mannheim in emphasising the role of generations in the shaping of ‘intellectual consciousness’, and go so far as to state that ‘twentieth-century thought has not been shaped by class but by generational experience’. Thus, they write, ‘[b]ecause generations rather than class shaped knowledge, Mannheim’s view is more sociologically relevant than the legacy of Marx and Gramsci’ (Edmunds and Turner 2002a, p. 69). Their emphasis on the extent to which generational consciousness is shaped by a major traumatic event ‘(war, pestilence, civil conflict or natural catastrophe such as an earthquake)’ (p. ix) affirms Mannheim’s insistence on the importance of interactions between generations and wider social forces in the development of an ‘actual’ generation (Mannheim 1952: 304).

Edmunds and Turner also challenge some important aspects of Mannheim’s theory. They develop Bourdieu’s (1984, 1988, 1993a, 1993b, 1990) discussion of generation and habitus, whereby ‘[a]ge cohorts of artists and intellectuals develop a generational habitus through their struggle for recognition on the cultural field’: for Edmunds and Turner (2002a), the ‘traumatic event’ that shapes generational consciousness ‘has to be incorporated into the practices of the everyday world of a

generation and thus to structure its habitus' (p. 15). The habitus is 'the collection of practices through which generational experiences are manifest', and '[t]he solidarity of a generation can be measured by the effective transmission and maintenance of a habitus of gestures, presentations and modes of action by its members' (p. 16). Thus, they argue:

Where a generation manages to develop a strong sense of its own culture through a shared habitus, it has a greater ability to mobilize its members around political issues or social causes. We might argue that the post-war baby boomers have retained a liberal culture and a habitus that is hostile to formal codes of behaviour. (Edmunds and Turner 2002a, p.16)

Edmunds and Turner suggest that, when looking at intellectual developments, 'there is an alternation between generations that put into place stable practices and institutions and the generations that follow this, which are left with no option but to challenge the established practices'. In this regard 'it might well be possible to synthesize the two distinct approaches to intellectuals offered by Gramsci and Bourdieu on the one hand and Mannheim on the other in the sense that the approaches can themselves be used to apply to different, alternate generations' (Edmunds and Turner 2002a, pp. 68-9).

Furthermore, Edmunds and Turner (2005) challenge Mannheim's insistence on the importance of the geographical location of generations, discussed in Chapter 3, suggesting that 'because the growth of global communications technology has enabled traumatic events, in an unparalleled way, to be experienced globally', the sociology of generations 'should develop the concept of global generations' (p. 559). As noted above, they also challenge the male focus of the sociology of generations, particularly in a context where women have played a more prominent role in political, cultural and social life. Thus Edmunds's (2002b) discussion of 'Generations, women and national consciousness' contends that 'women's experience of warfare generates in them an opposition to aggressive nationalism that in turn compels them to construct more benign forms of nationalism' – and that, moreover, 'the 1960s generation of women, empowered by economic, social, and political developments in the postwar period, have been especially active in opposing extreme forms of nationalism' (Edmunds and Turner 2002b, p. 32).

These attempts to engage with Mannheim almost one hundred years on, taking into account shifts in global communication, sexual relations, and developments in the theory of culture, are important in attempting to understand how generational consciousness is developed and transmitted. By a similar token, studies that seek to test Mannheim's theory through an examination of generations and social movements, such as those by Demartini (1985) and Whittier (1997), provide an invaluable contribution to a sociological understanding of the character of generational consciousness, and how its development is influenced by social, cultural, technological and familial factors.

This thesis, however, does not attempt to understand the development of generational consciousness itself. Rather, it seeks to indicate how, at a cultural and political level, the consciousness that this generation is a social problem has gained traction. The gap in the literature that this research question identified was an explanation of why, in the early twenty-first century, an interest emerged in seeking generational causes to social problems – and, specifically, why 'blaming the Boomers' appears to have emerged as a narrative across the political spectrum.

Two pieces of existing literature come close to examining this question, though these employ a different approach. The most recent is White's (2013) article, 'Thinking Generations'. White, Associate Professor of European Politics at the London School of Economics, explores why 'generationalism' has recently gained 'popularity' in political and policy debate. Informed by Bourdieu's (1991) sociology of categorization, White's analysis 'explores the nature, origins and implications of this way of thinking about today's society, elucidating the distinctive significance of the *generational principle of division*' (White 2013, pp. 216-7, emphasis in original).

White (2013) suggests that there can be two possible accounts about the appeal of generational thinking today. The first focuses on 'structural factors... which create an inviting context for such thinking', such as technological and commercial factors, major events, and demographic changes that put strain on public finances. A second 'type of account focuses on the political context these narratives emerge in, directing attention to the ends they serve' (p. 228). Here, White focuses on three political ends

that can be seen to be served by generationalism: a licence for economic reform, in the sense of a rationale for the reconfiguration of the welfare state; the assuaging of cross-cutting differences, where ‘a focus on generations tends to come at the *expense* of the consideration of alternative differences’; and a new way to ‘mobilize in support of an egalitarian agenda’, where, for example, Beckett (2010a) and Howker and Malik (2010a) adopt the concept ‘as a new language of collectivism, a way to speak to those presumed no longer reachable with class vocabulary’ (White 2013, pp. 231-236).

The findings of this thesis support much of White’s analysis, by indicating that the construction of the Baby Boomer problem in its current form serves to provide a narrative for what might, in previous eras, be considered political anxieties or claims. My conclusions share many of White’s concerns, about the way that the current focus on generational cleavage can ‘mask diversity, marginalize individuals, and evoke a deterministic conception of human agency’, which ‘jars with standard notions of democracy’ by putting into question the ‘pluralist ethos, equality of political status, and the reasoned evaluation of preferences’ on which democratic discourse hinges (White 2013, p. 217).

Another important piece of work is an ESRC-funded study conducted by Rebecca Leach of Keele University and colleagues, titled ‘Boomers and beyond: intergenerational consumption and the mature imagination’ (Leach 2007). This study aimed to understand the extent to which Baby Boomers define themselves as part of distinctive generational group; the extent to which a ‘baby boomer generational identity’ is expressed in patterns of consumption; and the extent to which ‘it is possible to identify distinctive “boomer” consumption patterns’ (Leach 2007, p. 26). The research employed three types of data collection: analysis of policy, marketing and media discourses about the boomer generation; secondary analysis of relevant data sets (including the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) and the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS)); and a survey of 150 respondents born between 1945 and 1954 (Leach 2007, p. 26).

The Leach study has yielded some important findings pertinent both to the self-identity of the Boomer generation, and the construction of this generation as a social problem, particularly with regard to ageing. Its findings indicate that the Boomer

generation is not a homogenous group, but that it nonetheless has a powerful sense of generational identity: thus, 'Boomers view themselves in a variety of ways, although there is a cross-cutting sense of being part of a "sixties" generation which challenged traditional values in a range of areas' (Leach 2007, p. 36).

Phillipson *et al.* (2008) present the findings of the Leach study's analysis of 'social and cultural constructions of first wave baby boomers' (those born between 1945 and 1954). The authors conducted a content analysis of the construction of the Baby Boomer problem by drawing on a range of sources: themes identified by the online databases Ageline and AgeInfo over the period 2002-2006; a variety of databases covering UK newspapers over the period 2002 to January 2007; and drawing on historical accounts of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as bibliographic surveys and articles from the UK, USA, Australia, Canada and France (Phillipson *et al.* 2008, paras 2.1-2.4). Phillipson *et al.* found that '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'. Having outlined 'the broad tone of the cultural climate constructing the "baby boomer" stereotype' and explored the narrative in some depth, the authors conclude:

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. (Phillipson *et al.* 2008, para 8.8)

## **2.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an account of the emergence of the sociology of generations within a wider historical context. I have noted the intensity of academic interest in generations during the student protests of the Sixties, and suggested that this provides the first stage in the construction of the Baby Boomer generation as a social problem. After the mid-1970s, there appears to be relatively less interest in the problem of

generations, until the more recent period, when scholars note a ‘re-awakened’, or ‘in vogue’, interest in generations and generationalism, focused in particular on the Baby Boomer generation (Edmunds and Turner 2005, p. 559; White 2013, p. 216).

The research presented here contributes to an existing body of research, by suggesting the basis for a critique of ‘Boomer blaming’. However, by starting from Mannheim’s approach to the problem of generations, situated within the sociology of knowledge, my aim is a broader one. I indicate how wider social, cultural and political pressures have intersected with both the demographic characteristics and the cultural attributes ascribed to the Baby Boomers to give rise to a consciousness that this generation constitutes a social problem for today. Chapter 3 discusses in more depth the theoretical orientation of this study, and its methodology.

## **Chapter 3 Theoretical orientation and methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The research question that this study intends to address is: how has the generation known as the ‘Baby Boomers’ come to be constructed as a social problem in Britain today? This chapter presents the theoretical orientation of the research, by situating it within the sociology of knowledge and the study of social problems.

It is not given that the study of the sociology of generations should follow the theory developed by Mannheim (1952). As discussed in the previous chapter, the study of generations has been developed within a number of disciplines, which have yielded insights relevant to sociology. Within sociology, there are theoretical perspectives that compete with Mannheim; and Mannheim has been subject to a number of criticisms, both at the theoretical level (see Curtis and Petras 1970; Edmunds and Turner 2002a, 2005; Remmling 1973) and in terms of the limitations evident in applying his theory to the empirical study of generations (Demartini 1985; Pilcher 1994). However, by situating ‘the problem of generations’ within a broader theory of the sociology of knowledge, Mannheim’s approach anticipates the social constructionist method later developed and employed by sociologists in the USA. This makes engagement with Mannheim’s work a fruitful basis for the study of the social construction of the Baby Boomer problem.

This chapter first provides a brief review of the sociology of knowledge, and shows how this laid the foundations for the social constructionist approach developed in more recent decades. As Jamrozik and Nocella (1998) note, social constructionism is but one of a number of sociological theories of social problems, which range from the ‘social pathology’ perspective of the nineteenth century through to the theories developed by the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, the Chicago School of Sociology, and ‘a range of social deviance theories’ (p. 2). This chapter discusses why social constructionism, which ‘shifted the focus from the “deviant population” and its “problems” to the people who made claims about certain phenomena as “problems”’ (Jamrozik and Nocella 1998, p. 2), offers the best method for this study, and outlines



the theoretical principles that informed the study design. It concludes by describing the study itself, and the research tools employed.

### **3.2 The sociology of knowledge and the construction of social problems**

Mannheim developed his sociology of knowledge in the inter-war period, between 1920 and 1930, when the problem of generations was assuming a particularly acute form in Europe. His approach, systematically presented in *Ideology and Utopia* (1936 [1929]) and *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (1952 [originally published as journal articles between 1923 and 1929]), is generally regarded as a critique of the ‘positivist’ school of sociological thought associated with Comte but with a long history in Western philosophy (Giddens 1974, p. 3). By distinguishing between ‘static’ and ‘dynamic’ thought (Mannheim 1952, pp. 84-97), and insisting on the importance of understanding the ‘concretely existing modes of thought’ that form the basis for people’s understanding of their world and their action within and upon it (Mannheim 1936, pp. 3-4), Mannheim situated his theory of the problem of generations within a theory of how ideas are concretely situated, transmitted and developed.

The previous chapter noted that Mannheim’s ‘problem of generations’ was developed in the context of a European-dominated sociological discussion. In the period following the Second World War the problem of generations emerged in a different form and context, becoming an issue of key interest in the United States of America, and being taken on and developed by such thinkers as Talcott Parsons (1902-79) and Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (1923-2010) (Jaeger 1985). A similar process is evident within the sociology of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> In the preface to his edited collection on the sociology of knowledge, Remmling (1973) credits Robert K. Merton with providing a major reason for the expanding interest in this discipline within the United

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<sup>4</sup> Curtis and Petras’s (1970) ‘reader’ on key contributions to the sociology of knowledge provides a useful snapshot of the geographical shift of this body of thought. Alongside Karl Mannheim, ‘early statements’ on the sociology of thought are dominated (but not exclusively represented as) extracts from the work of European thinkers, and include Francis Bacon, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Emile Durkheim, Max Scheler, Ernst Grünwald, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. ‘Later perspectives’ reveal a more North American influence, and include the work of Hans Speier, Talcott Parsons, Robert K. Merton, and Peter L. Berger. Contextual and critical approaches to the sociology of knowledge are represented by extracts from thinkers including Max Weber, John Horton, Karl Popper, Gerard de Gré, Arthur Child and Frank E. Hartung.

States: that ‘the methods, concepts, and theories of the sociologists of knowledge are assuming increasing relevance for the analysis of modern American life and its problems’, as that society “‘has come to have certain characteristics of those European societies in which the discipline was originally developed’” (Remmling 1973, p. xv; see also Merton 1937). With the development of social constructionist theories, many of the empirical problems and questions arising from previously-developed theories on the sociology of knowledge were tackled afresh, arguably resolving some problems while raising others.

The birth of the modern social constructionist approach is generally dated at 1966, with the publication of Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Berger and Luckmann 1991). As Best (2003) explains, this book, with its ‘arresting’ title, went on to inspire a new interest in the social construction of ‘various types of knowledge’ and ‘the creation of knowledge in many sectors of social life’ (Best 2003, pp. 135-6). Spector and Kitsuse’s (1977) text *Constructing Social Problems* ‘offered the guiding statement of the approach, which both transformed and revitalized the sociology of social problems, propelling it into a quarter century of exciting and innovative empirical research’ (Holstein and Miller 2003, p. 1).

It is outside of the scope of this thesis to enter into a detailed discussion of the sociology of knowledge. My aim is merely to distil from the literature the key principles that relate the sociology of knowledge to the problem of generations. From there I discuss how these principles have come to inform the methodological approach of social constructionism, with particular reference to the ‘social problems process’ outlined by Joel Best (2008). Having established the methodological principles that inform this piece of research as a whole, I present the methodological tools used to facilitate the empirical study into the construction of the ‘Baby Boomer’ as a social problem.

### **3.3 Six key enquiries about the problem of generations: Who, What, When, Where, Why, How?**

The wealth of literature on the sociology of knowledge, and the live debates within the sociology of generations and social constructionism about methodological flaws and limitations, present the researcher with a problem. How is it possible to establish clear lines of enquiry by which we can systematically explore the research question of how and why the Baby Boomers have become constructed as a social problem? In developing a methodology for this piece of research, I found it useful to start with the six questions popularly, and variously, known as the '6Ws', the '5Ws (and 1H)', or the '5Ws': *Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How?* These six questions are essential interrogative tools in understanding the social problems process. They also implicitly encapsulate the key questions formulated in Mannheim's theory of the sociology of knowledge, with its emphasis on the human subject and the time and place within which he exists and acts.

### **3.3.1 What is the sociology of knowledge?**

When Mannheim attempted to define the sociology of knowledge in the 1920s, he regarded this as 'one of the youngest branches of sociology', which 'arose in the effort to develop as its own proper field of research those multiple interconnections that had become apparent in the crisis of modern thought, and especially the social ties between theories and modes of thought' (Mannheim 1936, p. 264). There are, he argued, two components of the sociology of knowledge: 'as theory it seeks to analyse the relationship between knowledge and existence; as historical-sociological research it seeks to trace the forms that this relationship has taken in the development of mankind'. Only through developing a social scientific approach to knowledge 'can we hope to overcome the vague, ill-considered, and sterile form of relativism with regard to scientific knowledge which is increasingly prevalent today' (Mannheim 1936, p. 264).

These statements, taken from the opening pages of Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, point to the principal themes that run through this thesis. First, when considering knowledge sociologically, we need to consider ideas in relation to their expression and transmission by, and their impact on, people. This interaction between subject and object in 'everyday life' forms the basis of modern social constructionist methods. Berger and Luckmann (1991 [1966]) conclude their introduction to *The*

*Social Construction of Reality* with reference to ‘two of the most famous and influential “marching orders” for sociology’: Durkheim’s exhortation to ‘consider social facts as things’, and Weber’s observation that ‘the object of cognition is the subjective meaning-complex of action’. From this they argue:

These two statements are not contradictory. Society does indeed possess objective facticity. And society is indeed built up by activity that expresses subjective meaning... It is precisely the dual character of society in terms of objective facticity *and* subjective meaning that makes its ‘reality *sui generis*’, to use another key term of Durkheim’s. (Berger and Luckmann 1991, p.30)

The attempt to understand *how* reality is socially constructed thus involves an analysis of *who* plays *what* role in the construction of knowledge and, by extension, the social world. This subjective element requires that the social sciences take a different approach to the natural sciences. Mannheim’s appreciation of the difference between ‘cultural products’ and ‘natural objects’ formed an important part of his critique of the positivist approach to the social sciences:

Every cultural product in its entirety will... display three distinct ‘strata of meaning’: (a) its objective meaning, (b) its expressive meaning, (c) its documentary or evidential meaning. If we look at a ‘natural object’, we shall see at the first glance that which characterizes it, and the modern scientific attitude appropriate to its study is the fact that it is taken as nothing but itself and is fully cognizable without being transcended or rounded out in the two directions of which we spoke above. A cultural product, on the other hand, will not be understood in its proper or true meaning if we attend merely to that ‘strata of meaning’ which it conveys when we look at it merely as it is ‘itself’ – its objective meaning; we also have to take it as having an expressive and documentary meaning, if we want to exhaust its full significance. (Mannheim 1952, p. 44)

The multiple ‘strata of meaning’ exhibited by cultural products necessitates that their study involves a form of scientific inquiry that is distinct from that of the natural sciences. The ‘traditional view that a science can have only *one* true form’, Mannheim

argued, led ‘to the desire to punish sociology for not being able to show a unified method, by excluding it from the list of sciences’. In Mannheim’s view, rather than rejecting ‘a factually existing vital area of research, merely because it does not correspond to our conception of science’, one should rather question the existing conception of science as relates to culture:

If one... observes the concrete historical development of the structure of the cultural sciences... then one will not only come to see the *fact* that sociology and all the other cultural sciences must necessarily always be written anew, but also discover the deeper reasons why this is so. (Mannheim 1952, p. 126; emphasis in original.)

Mannheim’s interest in the continually-evolving nature of cultural products, whose meaning changes according to the time, place and the experiences within which they are received and re-interpreted, relates to his emphasis on historical context. The significance of the meaning represented by cultural products in their particular contexts, and how this meaning is transmitted and translated across time and space, is in turn central to the role played by generations in the preservation and transformation of society’s cultural heritage.

Mannheim’s insistence on the importance of approaching a sociological understanding of the human psyche, which can also account for the transmission of psychic, virtual and unconscious data, is a development of his approach to understanding the relationship between ‘knowledge and existence’. Just as a narrowly positivistic approach to the cultural sciences fails to grasp the multiple strata of meaning held by products of culture, so he considered that a narrowly empirical approach to human psychology – the ‘functionalization and mechanization of psychic phenomena’ – loses ‘the unity of the mind as well as that of the person’. The role that should be played by the sociology of knowledge in comprehending this unity is summed up in his assertion that: ‘A psychology without a psyche cannot take the place of an ontology’ (Mannheim 1936, p. 23).

For Mannheim, the ontology of the sociology of knowledge involves accounting for the role of consciousness – and by extension, the subconscious – in a

dynamic process of the construction of reality. For that reason, understanding the process by which the generational transmission of knowledge works is crucial to understanding the development of history.

### **3.3.2 Who is the subject/object of the sociology of knowledge?**

C. Wright Mills (1970 [1959]) isolated both the ‘task’ and the ‘promise’ of the sociological imagination as enabling us ‘to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society’ (p. 12). To recognise this task and this promise, argued Mills, ‘is the mark of the classic social analyst’, and as such unites the work of Durkheim, Comte, Mannheim, Marx, and Weber, amongst others. Mannheim’s approach to the sociology of knowledge, and the problem of generations, emphasises the active human element in the development of history and the necessity of understanding this in the context of people’s concrete life experiences. It is therefore worth discussing at some length the way that Mannheim theorised the development of generational consciousness, which is intimately connected to the problem of how knowledge is assimilated and developed over time and space.

As previously discussed, Mannheim’s essay on ‘The Problem of Generations’ begins with a critique of two schools of historical thought – the ‘positivist’ and the ‘historical-romantic’ approaches – in an attempt to challenge the notion of the ‘unilinear’ development of history while also recognising the broader social meaning of individuals’ activities within their social and temporal location. When elucidating the ‘fundamental facts in relation to generations’, Mannheim explains that ‘generation location is determined by the way in which certain patterns of experience and thought tend to be brought into existence by the *natural data* of the transition from one generation to another’: expressing the interaction of the natural and the social emphasised in his critique of the Positivist and historical/romantic schools (Mannheim 1952, p. 292; emphasis in original).

In order to ‘appreciate which features of social life result from the existence of generations’, Mannheim contends that one has to imagine ‘what the social life of man would be like if one generation lived on for ever and none followed to replace it’; and

against this imaginary society works out the ‘basic phenomena implied by the mere fact of the existence of generations’ in our own society:

- a) new participants in the cultural process are emerging, whilst
- b) former participants in that process are continually disappearing;
- c) members of anyone generation can participate only in a temporally limited section of the historical process, and
- d) it is therefore necessary continually to transmit the accumulated cultural heritage;
- e) the transition from generation to generation is a continuous process.

(Mannheim 1952, p. 292; emphasis in original).

Mannheim’s concern is with the transmission of the ‘accumulated cultural heritage’ both through ‘conscious teaching’ and, more importantly, informal mechanisms of generational interaction. He emphasises the importance of ‘fresh contact’, whereby the ‘continuous emergence of new age groups’ means that, rather than culture being held onto by immortal members of society, it is developed by ‘individuals who come into contact anew’ with this accumulated heritage. This experience has consequences for the individual, for example when leaving home as an adolescent, when ‘a quite visible and striking transformation of the consciousness of the individual in question takes place: a change, not merely in the content of experience, but in the individual’s mental and spiritual adjustment to it’ (Mannheim 1952, p. 293). It is also significant for the dynamic renewal of society.

Mannheim differentiates between ‘two types of “fresh contact”’: one based on a shift in social relations, and the other on vital factors (the change from one generation to another)’, and argues:

The latter type is *potentially* much more radical, since with the advent of the new participant in the process of culture, the change of attitude takes place in a different individual whose attitude towards the heritage handed down by his predecessors is a novel one. (Mannhem 1952, p. 294. Emphasis in original.)

If the cultural process were always carried on and developed by the same individuals, speculates Mannheim, “‘fresh contacts’ might still result from shifts in social relationships’ but the more radical form would be missing, and ‘any fundamental social pattern (attitude or intellectual trend) would probably be perpetuated’. This would carry the ‘dangers resulting from onesidedness’. ‘There might be a certain compensation for the loss of fresh generations in such a utopian society only if the people living in it were possessed, as befits the denizens of a Utopia, of perfectly universal minds – minds capable of experiencing all that there was to experience and of knowing all there was to know, and enjoying an elasticity such as to make it possible at any time to start afresh’, he writes; however, the absence of such a ‘perfect “elasticity of mind”’ means that ‘the continuous emergence of new human beings in our own society acts as compensation for the restricted and partial nature of the individual consciousness’. While generational change does result in a ‘loss of accumulated cultural possessions’, it also ‘facilitates reevaluation of our inventory and teaches us both to forget that which is no longer useful and to covet that which has yet to be won’ (Mannheim 1952, p. 294).

The renewal of society through generational change thus leads to a focus on youth specifically, as having ‘fresh contact’ with society’s accumulated cultural heritage. Mannheim explains this through the concept of ‘social remembering’: the ‘function’ served by ‘the continuous withdrawal of previous participants in the process of culture’ is ‘the necessary social purpose of enabling us to forget. If society is to continue, social remembering is just as important as forgetting and action starting from scratch’. He contends that ‘[a]ll psychic and cultural data only really exist in so far as they are produced and reproduced in the present’, and this can be achieved in two ways: either as ‘consciously recognized models on which men pattern their behaviour (for example, the majority of subsequent revolutions tended to model themselves more or less consciously on the French Revolution)’, or as ‘unconsciously “condensed”, merely “implicit” or “virtual” patterns’ – for example, the way that ‘past experiences are “virtually” contained in such specific manifestations as that of sentimentality’ (Mannheim 1952, p. 295).

Consciousness, according to Mannheim – the possibility of ‘really questioning and reflecting on things’ – only emerges ‘at the point where personal experimentation



with life begins – round about the age of 17, sometimes a little earlier and sometimes a little later’. This is the point at which ‘life’s problems begin to be located in a “present” and are experienced as such’. It is this emergence of a reflective individual, active in society, that gives youth both the ‘freshness’ of its contact with society, and its agency to make that dynamic contact with the accumulated cultural heritage:

The ‘up-to-dateness’ of youth therefore consists in their being closer to the ‘present’ problems ... and in the fact that they are dramatically aware of a process of de-stabilization and take sides in it. All this while, the older generation cling to the re-orientation that had been the drama of their youth. (Mannheim 1952, pp. 300-1)

Both in terms of formal education and the ‘virtual’ transmission of cultural data, both the effectiveness of this process and the tensions inherent within it is tempered by the different historical location of the formative experiences of teacher and pupil. An ‘adequate education’ of the young ‘(in the sense of the complete transmission of all experiential stimuli which underlie pragmatic knowledge)’, is difficult because ‘the experiential problems of the young are defined by a different set of adversaries from those of their teachers’: the teacher-pupil relationship is not, therefore, ‘as between one representative of “consciousness in general” and another, but as between one possible subjective centre of vital orientation and another subsequent one’ (Mannheim 1952: 301). However, cultural transmission is not a passive, one-way process: ‘not only does the teacher educate his pupil, but the pupil educates his teacher too. Generations are in a state of constant interaction’.

Mannheim’s understanding of cultural renewal brought about through the challenge of ‘fresh contact’ in the form of emerging adults, and his emphasis on the importance of formative experience and conscious reflection in this process, theorises in sociological terms the significance of the emergence of youth as a distinct historical phenomenon, discussed in the previous chapter. Both the process of socialisation, within and without the family unit, and the more formal processes of induction into culture (through education) and independent citizenship (through leaving home and entering the world of work) are conceptualised as essential to the question of what makes generations a phenomenon of sociological significance. Youth movements,

comprising both a ‘top-down’ attempt by adult society at large to socialise its young, and an expression of the emerging conscious reflection of youth itself, represent the emergence of a distinct notion of agency conceptualised in generational terms.

For Mannheim, the importance of the ‘fresh contact’ between new generations and the wealth of human history already in existence was in the extent to which this necessitates the dynamic process of progress: knowledge is continually being transmitted and assimilated under different historical conditions, to individuals who are differently constituted to their predecessors as a consequence of their generational location. The central importance of the generational question is that ‘the continuous emergence of new participants in the cultural process’ (Mannheim 1952, p. 293) means that generations are *both the subjects and objects* of knowledge assimilation and creation.

This is not to say that *only* generations play this role – much of the debate within the sociology of knowledge concerns disputes over the extent to which ruling elites (for example) are disproportionately the creators of knowledge, in contrast to those oppressed by race or sex, or excluded from knowledge creation by their social class (see discussion in Edmunds and Turner 2002a, 2002b). However, the question of interest to the research conducted for this thesis is the degree to which generations play a *distinct* role as the recipients of accumulated knowledge, the creation of new knowledge, and the process by which that new knowledge comes to have a purchase on wider society and, by extension, the course of history.

The sociological literature on generations that followed Mannheim has tended to emphasise either the ‘active’ role of generations, or their ‘passive’ role as the recipients of accumulated knowledge or life experiences. The ‘structural/functionalist’ perspective of Talcott Parsons and S. N. Eisenstadt is often presented as a conservative apology for the continuation of the social order, with generations appearing as the problematic object of a society struggling to assimilate its new members. Mannheim’s dynamic approach to the problem of generations is then presented in direct and ‘active’ contrast, with generations presented as an alternative to social movements based on class. As noted in the previous chapter, Abrams (1970) and Goertzel (1972) discussed, in different ways, the tension between generational and class consciousness. Margaret

Braungart (1984) concludes her article on 'Aging and Politics' with the prediction: 'What class-politics has been to sociology in the past, life-course politics may be to political sociology in the future' (Braungart 1984, p. 93). More recently, Edmunds and Turner (2002a) develop the concept of a 'strategic generation', which is 'generative of the conditions of thinking and action of subsequent cohorts. In Marxist terminology, it is a generation for-itself' (as distinct from the passive 'generation in-itself') (Edmunds and Turner 2002a, pp. 17-18).

The active/passive dichotomy presented within the sociology of generations tends to distort the terms of the problem in general. While Parsons and Eisenstadt are concerned with the problem of generations in its integrative sense, it should be acknowledged that these theorists are acutely aware of the subtle problems and tensions arising within the intergenerational contract in modern society. They recognise that young people are socialised by institutions (the family and the education system) that are at the same time out of step with other demands and expectations of society, and much of the 'structural-functionalist' perspective represents an attempt to understand the process of social continuity through an appreciation of the differential characteristics of the people involved in the process. Thus, it would be wrong to characterise this approach as a passive, or static, one.

In a similar vein, the emphasis placed on Mannheim's 'active' generation units sometimes reveals a one-sided reading of his analysis. It is notable, for example, that Mannheim's insistence on the importance of a generation's formative historical experience has led some to read Mannheim as according an essentially 'passive' role to generations: as denoted by Jaeger's (1985) discussion of the 'imprint hypothesis'. Edmunds and Turner (2002a) develop their theory of active, strategic, generations-for-themselves at the same time as emphasising the importance of 'traumatic historical events' in the formation of a strategic 'generational consciousness', and place these developments within a wider context of resource scarcity. Edmunds and Turner's insistence that 'History is the history of the consciousness of strategic, active generations' begs the question implicit in much of the literature on the sociology of generations: to what degree is generational consciousness the passive, or 'imprinted' product of particular historical moments, and to what degree can it (actively) shape future history?

A narrow focus on generations in their own terms leads to problems both at a theoretical level, as indicated above, and with the attempt to apply the theory to empirical research (see Demartini 1985, Jaeger 1985, Kertzer 1983, Pilcher 1994). It was precisely this problem that Mannheim was careful to avoid, by placing his appreciation of the ‘problem of generations’ within the context of their interaction with ‘wider social forces’, and locating his analysis within the sociology of knowledge as a whole. And it is for this contextual reason that this thesis intended to examine the wider cultural expression of the Baby Boomer problem – in this case, through the cultural script developed and popularised by the British media.

My study investigates, first, *who* is the object of the discussion – precisely which cohort of people is being talked about under the label of Baby Boomer in the UK? When researching the problem of the Baby Boomer generation, we are presented with a clear example in which it is not only a particular phenomenon that has been presented as problematic (a large demographic cohort, the ‘Baby Boomers’), but the people, or character-type, within that cohort (the ‘Baby Boomer’). The size of the Baby Boomer cohort is constructed as a problem, but so too are the values, attitudes and forms of behaviour culturally associated with the Baby Boomers as individuals. This required that the study adopt a particular approach to social constructionist methods.

As Loseke (2003) explains, constructionism has tended to focus on claimsmaking surrounding ‘putative *conditions*’, or ‘*condition-categories*’; yet claims constructing such categories often simultaneously construct the types of *people* who inhabit those categories’. Thus, she suggests, constructionists ‘might give more attention to examining this rhetorical practice of “people production”’ (Loseke 2003, p. 120, emphasis in original). Chapter 4 pays particular attention to the ways that claimsmaking constructs the Baby Boomers as ‘putative people’.

The assumption that the Baby Boomer problem is one that has been constructed, rather than one that merely *is*, requires an investigation into the claims made about the Baby Boomer problem in contemporary life, and the individuals or schools of thought (in Best’s terminology, ‘claimsmakers’) who construct this cohort as a social problem. The insight formulated by Mannheim was that generations of

individuals are both acted upon by social forces and become social actors themselves; this research indicates that the Baby Boomers have been ‘acted upon’ by older and younger generations, who have constructed this cohort as a social problem, and also the way that representatives of the ‘Baby Boomers’ themselves have self-consciously constructed their generation as a problem. Indeed, one noteworthy finding of this study, discussed in later chapters, is that the media debate about the problem of the Baby Boomers appears to be led by a relatively small group of claimsmakers, whose influential position within the cultural and political elite may inflate the extent to which concern about the Baby Boomer problem is shared by wider society.

One objective of this research is therefore to develop a more subtle understanding of generational consciousness than exists elsewhere in the literature, as this pertains to the Baby Boomer problem. The idea explored in what follows is that generational consciousness can be understood both as a generation’s consciousness of itself, but also as the consciousness that generation – or a particular generation – constitutes a social problem. Analysing this latter point requires a methodological approach that can take account of the wider social circumstances in which the Baby Boomers have been conceptualised and discussed over the years.

### **3.3.5 When is the problem of generations developed?**

The literature indicates that the concept of ‘generations’ has assumed different meanings, and been accorded different significance, in particular historical periods. An analysis of the Baby Boomer phenomenon thus begins with an emphasis on historical specificity: the need to understand a phenomenon within the context in which it emerges.

Despite disputes over dating the Boomers as a demographic cohort, described in Chapter 1, all agree that members of this generation were born after the end of the Second World War. Thus understanding the discussion of this cohort requires attention to the historical period in which those discussions are conducted: the construction of the Baby Boomer problem could not have happened in, say, 1920; although other generations have historically, on occasion, been constructed as problematic.

Historical specificity is a central theme of the problem of generations. Mannheim's essay is intimately related to his theories concerning historicism and the development and transmission of knowledge. As Kecskemeti (1952) explains, according to historicism 'the most important thing about works of the human mind is that they can be "dated": we cannot understand them except by relating them to the period in which they originated'. Refining this analysis, Kecskemeti explains, faces us with 'the problem of the generation as a historic unit':

For it is not only possible to 'date' a certain work as belonging to a certain period; within one and the same period, one can distinguish the works of the older generation from those of the younger. Here, then, we see concrete groups which in a way determine styles of thought and action; and yet, it cannot be said that it is 'interests' or 'common socio-political aspirations' that give the members of the same generation a common orientation. Thus, the concept of generation confronts the sociology of knowledge with a difficulty: other than 'sociological' factors, after all, seem to be responsible for certain characteristic modifications of thought. (Kecskemeti 1952, p. 22)

The purpose of Mannheim's essay on 'The Problem of Generations' was to attempt to bring precision into the study of the development, assimilation and transmission of knowledge. Intellectual works can be 'dated' chronologically, and this is the first principle of historical specificity; but because ideas do not develop in a unilinear fashion, by the same individuals, or within a social vacuum, chronological dating alone does not provide a fully-rounded understanding of the development of knowledge (Mannheim 1952, p. 281). When dating ideas, we require a more precise way of dating the individuals developing those ideas, and this requires attention to where these individuals are in their own biographies as well as within the slice of history that they inhabit.

To put it another way: it cannot be assumed that individuals in their twenties will assimilate and develop ideas in the same way as those in their forties, because the 'fresh contact' between a younger person and a body of knowledge will make this knowledge differently absorbed and developed: 'with the advent of the new participant in the process of culture, the change of attitude takes place in a different individual

whose attitude towards the heritage handed down by his predecessors is a novel one' (Mannheim 1952, p. 294). The question of how cultural heritage is carried forward thus requires sensitivity to their interaction with individuals' own biographies and the context of their lives: their contemporaries, their formative experiences, and their 'social location'.

An appreciation of biographical location has particular relevance when analysing the construction of the Baby Boomer problem. For example, two influential claims recently articulated in the British grey literature make clear the authors' own generational engagement with the Baby Boomer problem. 'We are the children of the baby boomers, the so-called "boomer echo,"' write Howker and Malik (2010a, pp. 5-6), who at the time of their book's publication were both 29 years of age. David Willetts (2010a) on the other hand, confesses: 'I was born in 1956, in the middle of the baby boom' (p. xvi). In both these accounts, it is apparent that the year of the author's birth informs the approach that they take to the problem; and that the emphasis on generation as the cause of the problem means that its intersection with one's personal biography is self-consciously articulated.

Thus, while accepting Mannheim's suggestion of the effect of 'fresh contact' upon the transmission of society's cultural heritage in general, we may weigh up the importance of an individual's biographical age and experience against the objective existence of an historically-assimilated body of knowledge. However, this thesis hypothesises that the personalisation inherent in the construction of generation as a social problem – bluntly, that one's biological age immediately constructs one as either a 'victim or villain' in the social problems process (Loseke and Best 2003, p. 110) – gives relatively more weight to an individual's partial (subjective) understanding of this particular problem.

### **3.3.6 Where is the problem of generations developed?**

As noted above, the post-war period brought a geographical shift in the 'home' of the sociology of knowledge, and with it the development of the problem of generations, from Europe to North America. Curtis and Petras (1970) explain this shift in the following way:

The first and most often recognized source was the German philosophical-sociological tradition, with its sociocultural background, as manifested in the work of the nineteenth-century folk psychologists. Second was the influence that developed in France, especially through Durkheimian sociology and social psychology. The work of the nineteenth-century French crowd psychologists is important for an understanding of the background of this tradition. The third source derived from the movement of thought represented by the American social behaviorists, especially those who made up what is known as the 'Chicago School' in sociology. (It is ironic that from a narrow perspective the works of these individuals are often considered to be the antithesis of a sociology of knowledge approach.) Not to be discounted in this connection was the role played by pragmatism in American philosophy in redirecting attention to the relationship between the individual and social environment and away from a system of absolutism and determinism. (Curtis and Petras 1970, p. 3)

The geographical shift in the sociology of knowledge affects, and is reflected in, the way this tradition developed. However, while recognising the importance of the geographical location of this body of thought, it is important not to adopt a position of 'geographical determinism' regarding intellectual works. We have to take into account not only the origins of intellectual works, but how they are diffused and thus developed. For example, the German sociologist Max Scheler is recognised as the 'father' or 'inventor' of the sociology of knowledge (Curtis and Petras 1970, p. 16; Berger and Luckmann 1991, p. 21), but as Berger and Luckmann explain, 'when sociologists today think of the sociology of knowledge, *pro* or *con*, they usually do so in terms of Mannheim's formulation of it'. They attribute this to the fact that Scheler's work led to extensive debate in Germany about 'the validity, scope and applicability of the new discipline', from which emerged Mannheim's formulation, which 'marked the transposition of the sociology of knowledge into a more narrowly sociological context'. This was the formulation in which the sociology of knowledge 'arrived in the English-speaking world' – thanks, according to Berger and Luckmann, to the 'accessibility' of Mannheim's work: much of Scheler's was untranslated, and that Mannheim's work 'is less burdened with philosophical "baggage" than Scheler's made



him ‘the more “congenial” figure for sociologists’ (Berger and Luckmann 1991, pp. 20-21).

In addition to diffusion, there is evidence of collaboration across geographical boundaries in formulating the sociology of knowledge. Berger and Luckmann’s ‘treatise in the sociology of knowledge’ is a good example of this. Peter Berger was at the New School for Social Research in New York, USA, and Thomas Luckmann was at the University of Frankfurt in Germany; the collaborative project initially included ‘one other sociologist and two philosophers’, and Berger and Luckmann acknowledge the contributions made by Hansfried Kellner, in Germany, and Stanley Pullberg, in France (Berger and Luckmann 1991, pp. 8-9).

Attending to the location within which knowledge – and by extension, a sociology of knowledge – is constructed and theorised is crucial to understanding the social and intellectual influences upon these ideas. However, it is also important to recognise that geography – like time – does not constitute a hard and fast boundary around knowledge. Ideas can transcend the circumstances in which they develop, through the processes of diffusion and collaboration, and also through their developing, in ‘fresh contact’ with new generations, relevance for new circumstances. Thus we can speak, in this thesis, of an ‘Anglo-American’ approach to the problem of generations today, which arises from the continuous political, ideological and intellectual infusion of ideas from the USA to Britain.

In the recent literature on generations, much is made of the role of technology in this process – the way in which the internet, for example, breaks down geographical barriers to the access of ideas and the consciousness of global events (Edmunds and Turner 2005). But as the history of the sociology of knowledge shows, diffusion and collaboration took place many decades before the advent of personal computers. I suggest that it is rather the growth of a shared cultural outlook that gives rise to a shared set of ideas about the Baby Boomer problem, despite the existence of demonstrable differences between Britain and America at the level of demographics, economic and social policy. By focusing this study on the construction of the Baby Boomer problem in the British media, I am able to point to some of the contradictions

between Anglo-American cultural assumptions and claims, and the social reality about which these claims purport to speak.

### **3.3.5 How is the problem constructed?**

The approach taken by this study assumes the need to appreciate the relation between objective and subjective factors in understanding how and why the Baby Boomer has been constructed as a social problem in twenty-first century Britain. I intend to examine the objective character of this problem by engaging with demographic and other established social facts about the Baby Boomer generation, but without assuming that the subjective meaning ascribed to the Baby Boomers is inherent within these objective conditions. Thus, this study needs to ask what it is, specifically, about contemporary society that causes the Baby Boomer problem to be constructed as it is.

Much of the literature within the sociology of knowledge has rightly been critical of crude economic determinism, whilst retaining the appreciation that there exists a relationship between structural factors and broader cultural developments. Another current in the discussion of the problem of generations, and of particular relevance to the study of the Baby Boomer problem, comes from the use of demography. In this regard, a natural fact (the number of babies born in any particular cohort) is seen as the causal factor of a social problem. This ‘demographic consciousness’ (Furedi 1997) then becomes the foundation upon which other claims about this social problem – housing shortages, pension shortfalls, healthcare crises – are built. As Mannheim stressed, the problem of generations does very clearly express a two-fold character: generations are biologically generated, but they exist socially.

The emphasis in this study on the *social* construction of the Baby Boomer problem acknowledges that the ‘Baby Boomers’ exist biologically, as people; and demographically, as a cohort – and that without these aspects of their existence the Baby Boomers could not have been constructed as a problem in the way that they have been. But it is the Baby Boomers’ *social* existence that turns this generation from a natural fact into a social problem. This is the subject of discussion in Chapter 5.

A tension that emerges for the study of generations often surfaces around debates about agency, class, and social location. One difficulty facing the sociological study of generations in the early twentieth century, centrally recognised by Mannheim and acknowledged by the wider literature, was how features distinct to generations could be separated from other factors: for example, social class, geographical location, and occupation. To avoid a narrow, ‘naturalistic’ approach, he argues, ‘the student of the generation problem cannot try to specify the effects attributable to the factor of generations before he has separated all the effects due to the specific dynamism of the historical and social sphere’ (Mannheim 1952, p. 311). Mannheim addresses this problem through his discussion of social location (*Lagerung*) and ‘concrete groups’. Concrete groups, he argues, were those such as the family, tribe, or sect, which shared the characteristic that ‘the individuals of which they are composed do actually *in concrete* form a group, whether the entity is based on vital, existential ties of “proximity” or on the conscious application of the rational will’ (Mannheim 1952, p. 288, emphasis in original).

Mannheim emphasises, first, the difference between such concrete groups and generations: a generation can neither be said to be a community, ‘a group which cannot exist without its members having concrete knowledge of each other, and which ceases to exist as a mental and spiritual unit as soon as physical proximity is destroyed’; nor is it comparable to ‘organizations formed for a specific purpose’, which are characterized by ‘a deliberate act of foundation, written statutes, and a machinery for dissolving the organization’ (Mannheim 1952, pp. 288-9). Even where ‘a feeling for the unity of a generation is consciously developed into a basis for the formation of concrete groups’, as in the case of the ‘modern German Youth Movement’, such groups ‘are most often mere cliques, with the one distinguishing characteristic that group formation is based upon the consciousness of belonging to one generation, rather than upon definite objectives’. Nonetheless, argues Mannheim, members of a generation are ‘undoubtedly bound together in certain ways’. In order to understand a consciousness of generational unity, and its broader social impact, Mannheim drew upon the concept of *Lagerung* (location) to ‘reflect upon the character of a different sort of social category, materially quite unlike the generation but bearing a certain structural resemblance to it – namely, the class position (*Klassenlage*) of an individual in society’ (Mannheim 1952, p. 289).

Mannheim's comparison between generation and class has drawn much criticism and fomented some confusion. For example Jaeger (1985) states that 'Mannheim sees generational contexts as special types of social strata and thereby treats them on the same level as class membership'; the resulting attempt to examine historical material both from the viewpoint of generation and class leads to a rather messy and imprecise approach, where the 'cross-classification of people into simple age groupings and their respective class membership creates a great number of possible combinations' (Jaeger 1985, p. 285). However, it is worth reviewing the 'generation / class' analogy at a theoretical level in more depth here, as this forms the foundation of much twentieth-century interest in generations in terms of the question of agency.

Mannheim defines class position 'in its wider sense' as 'the common "location" (*Lagerung*) certain individuals hold in the economic and power structure of a given society as their "lot"'. As with membership of a generation:

One is proletarian, *entrepreneur*, or *rentier*, and he is what he is because he is constantly aware of the nature of his specific 'location' in the social structure, i.e. of the pressures or possibilities of gain resulting from that position. This place in society does not resemble membership of an organization terminable by a conscious act of will. Nor is it at all binding in the same way as membership of a community (*Gemeinschaft*) which means that a concrete group affects every aspect of an individual's existence. (Mannheim 1952, p. 289)

Also like membership of a generation, '[c]lass position is an objective fact, whether the individual in question knows his class position or not, and whether he acknowledges it or not'; and 'class-consciousness does not necessarily accompany a class position, although in certain social conditions the latter can give rise to the former, lending it certain features, and resulting in the formation of a "conscious class"'. This does not mean, however, that Mannheim equates generation directly with class, in the way that is sometimes assumed. His interest in expounding this analogy is in 'the general phenomenon of social *location* as such': 'Besides the concrete social group, there is also the phenomenon of similar location of a number of individuals in a social structure – under which heading both classes and generations fall'. On this point, he concludes

that 'the unity of generations is constituted essentially by a similarity of location of a number of individuals within a social whole' ((Mannheim 1952, pp. 289-90).

Thus, social location or *Lagerung* becomes the means through which Mannheim attempts to isolate what is specific about generations. Generations are not understood merely in terms of their direct kinship relations, nor by the date on the calendar by which they are born, but in their relation to other individuals of the same and different generations and their relation to broader social forces and events. Again, the importance of the interplay between the natural and the social is important here. While '[c]lass-position was based upon the existence of a changing economic and power structure in society', generation location 'is based on the existence of biological rhythm in human existence-the factors of life and death, a limited span of life, and ageing. Individuals who belong to the same generation, who share the same year of birth, are endowed, to that extent, with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process' (Mannheim 1952, p. 290).

To the extent that generation location relates to the biological process of birth, it is not entirely socially ascribed; on the other hand, the fact of being born in a particular time and place does not give the full meaning to a generation's location in society. This comes from its role in shaping the social conditions of its time, which arises from the formation, within generations, of distinct 'generation units'. Noting that '[t]he generation unit represents a much more concrete bond than the actual generation as such', Mannheim stresses the following point:

*Youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation; while those groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways, constitute separate generation units. (Mannheim 1952, p. 304; emphasis in original)*

Mannheim's concept of 'generation units' is highlighted by much of the literature as the defining feature of his analysis of the problem of generations, and emerges as a centrally useful concept for the study of the construction of the Baby Boomers as a cultural problem.

By moving from a discussion of generational location to the concept of generation units, Mannheim formulates the question of generational agency. This does not emerge independently of social context: indeed, ‘not every generation location – not even every age-group – creates new collective impulses and formative principles original to itself and adequate to its particular situation’. Where it does occur, Mannheim describes the process as ‘*a realization of potentialities inherent in the location*’, and argues that the frequency of such realizations is probably ‘closely connected with the tempo of social change’:

When as a result of an acceleration in the tempo of social and cultural transformation basic attitudes must change so quickly that the latent, continuous adaptation and modification of traditional patterns of experience, thought, and expression is no longer possible, then the various new phases of experience are consolidated somewhere, forming a clearly distinguishable new impulse, and a new centre of configuration. (Mannheim 1952, p. 309)

In such cases, the outcome is ‘the formation of a new generation style, or of a new *generation entelechy*’. The emergence of generation entelechies in turn gives rise to ‘two possibilities’:

On the one hand, the generation unit may produce its work and deeds unconsciously out of the new impulse evolved by itself, having an intuitive awareness of its existence as a group but failing to realize the group’s character as a generation unit. On the other hand, groups may consciously experience and emphasize their character as generation units – as is the case with the contemporary German youth movement, or even to a certain extent with its forerunner, the Student’s Association (*Burschenschaft*) Movement in the first half of the nineteenth century, which already manifested many of the characteristics of the modern youth movement. (Mannheim 1952, p. 309)

The more rapid the tempo of social and cultural change, argues Mannheim, ‘the greater are the chances that particular generation location groups will react to changed situations by producing their own entelechy’. On the other hand, ‘it is conceivable that

too greatly accelerated a tempo might lead to mutual destruction of the embryo entelechies', in which generations close in age, 'frustrated in the production of an individual entelechy, tend to attach themselves, where possible, to an earlier generation which may have achieved a satisfactory form, or to a younger generation which is capable of evolving a newer form' (Mannheim 1952, p. 309).

Thus, according to Mannheim, the activity and agency of each generation must be seen in connection with the broader tempo of social change and the generation units who are already playing (or not) a role in shaping society within that context. In this way, it becomes theoretically possible to account for apparently 'silent' generations as much as active generations, and to account for the sometimes apparent lack of clear distinction between one generation and another.

Chapter 2 notes that the speed of social and technological change is a theme that becomes heavily emphasised in the postwar period, as the backdrop and sometimes explanation for generational tensions. In this context, and in the literature produced around the turn of the twenty-first century, Mannheim's theory of 'generation units' gains some popularity as an account of the expression of agency that appears to be rooted in age, or generation, rather than social class (Braungart 1984, Goertzel 1972, Edmunds and Turner 2002a; see also Laufer and Bengston 1974). This raises some interesting questions regarding Mannheim's understanding of the role of generations in their relationship with 'wider social forces' – which, in the 1920s, centrally included the class struggle. The more recent literature on generations appears to suggest that when class no longer provides an obvious expression of agency – 'class for itself' – then the consciousness of generations can provide an alternative, in the form of a strategic 'generation for-itself' mobilising its interests in the context of scarcity (Edmunds and Turner 2002a: 17-18).

Later chapters discuss the way in which the notion of a generation with distinct interests and a political agenda has been developed through the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem, and suggests that the elision of a particular 'generation unit' – the student radicals of the Sixties – with the outlook of an entire generation can have the effect of obscuring some wider institutional and cultural changes and political shifts. For example, the 'strategic' consciousness of the Baby Boomers could arguably

be analysed more accurately in terms of the outlook and behaviour of a new elite, rather than a generation. We see hints of this through the media coverage of the 1992 US Presidential election, analysed in Chapter 6.

### **3.3.6 Why has the problem been constructed as it has?**

Loseke (2003) suggests that ‘discursive productions of people-types simultaneously construct preferred *emotional orientations* and responses toward the constructed categories’. Emotions can be analysed as ‘socially-constructed language forms’; thus, ‘social problems claims might be profitably examined as members’ ways of constructing moral evaluation *and* emotion’ (Loseke 2003, pp. 120-1, emphasis in original). To ‘know’ the truth of the claim that the Baby Boomers are a social problem requires analysis of the meaning behind emotion-based the discourse used to express frustration and attribute blame.

The emotive character of much of the discourse of the Baby Boomer problem relates to the broader problem of the status of knowledge. As the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 indicates, the rise of generational tensions has historically been linked to a challenge – as expressed in the younger generation – to the ideas, values and norms of established society. Thus the carnage of the First World War led members of that obliterated generation of young men, as expressed through their literary representatives, to confront and challenge the cultural, political and spiritual values of an older elite that would bring the world to the brink of destruction (Wohl 1980).

Historically, however, this challenge to the knowledge of the older generation has been conceptualised as a confrontation with ignorance: the experience of youth in the trenches, for example, is seen to provide it with a wisdom lacking in the complacency of its elders, as expressed so sharply in Remarque’s (1987) classic novel, first published in 1929. In the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, when the Baby Boomer generation came of age, the elder generation’s perceived stranglehold on knowledge was also challenged. The *Zeitgeist* required that even the most sacred tenets of society’s knowledge be questioned: right down to sexuality, and (in)sanity (Diski 2010, Marwick 1999).



In researching the construction of the Baby Boomer problem, however, I have found a slightly different dynamic. The Boomers tend to be presented, not as custodians of traditional ‘old ways’, but as a generation that recklessly pushed the boundaries of knowledge and experimentation ‘too far’. They are not criticised for imposing constraints upon younger generations, but for removing the constraints that, it is alleged, held society together. In this sense, the emotive framing of the Baby Boomer problem seems to express, less a considered critique of the ideas of the recent past than a reflexive reaction against the problems of today, crudely expressed in terms of generational conflict.

This thesis, then, is both an attempt to know the truth behind claims that the Baby Boomers constitute a social problem in Britain today, and a tentative exploration of the way in which knowledge itself has become mystified through the mobilisation of generational claimsmaking.

### **3.5 Study design and research methods**

While there have been some recent attempts to engage with the current focus on the Baby Boomer problem through offering a critical account of ‘generationalism’ (White 2013), other sociological literature tends to focus on the experience of generations themselves, and references to the ‘Baby Boomer’ both within and without the academic literature implicitly accept the terms of the problem as it has been constructed.

The empirical work by Leach and colleagues (2007) on British Baby Boomers’ self-identity and consumption behaviour has contributed an important challenge to the “‘baby boomer” stereotype’, in providing a ‘sociological analysis of the boomer generation’ (Phillipson 2008, para 8.8). My study builds on this work, but has both a broader aim, and a narrower focus. I aim to give a sociological account, not of the Baby Boomer generation itself, but of how and why this generation has become constructed as a problem in Britain today. In doing so, I focus on a dataset of newspaper articles spanning a 26-year period, to show how the narrative of the Baby Boomer problem has developed over time.

In approaching this study, I drew on two distinct, but related, branches of cultural sociology. The first was the concept of a ‘cultural script’ developed by Swidler (1986, 2001), Bellah *et al* (1996), and Hochschild (2003). Here, I was interested in uncovering ‘the way culture is *used*’ (Swidler 2001, p. 5, emphasis in original) to inform how the Baby Boomer cohort, and by extension the question of generations, is framed in Britain in the twenty-first century. The second was Best’s (2008) elaboration of the role of claimsmaking and rhetoric in the construction of the ‘social problems process’. This helped me to identify the relationship(s) between the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem and the wider contextual dynamics that helped to shape the form taken by this script, and to give it wider purchase and prominence.

These concepts informed my study design, which was a Qualitative Media Analysis (QMA) of articles published in the national British press over the 26-year period 1986-2011. QMA is a technique developed by David Altheide (1996), which blends ‘the traditional notion of *objective content analysis* with *participant observation* to form *ethnographic content analysis*, or how a researcher interacts with documentary materials so that specific statements can be placed in the proper context for analysis’ (Altheide 1996, p. 2, emphasis in original). For Altheide, an appreciation of the context in which a document is produced is important in understanding its ‘meaning and message’ – and these meanings, in turn, ‘*emerge* or become more clear through constant comparison of documents over a period of time’. The concept of ‘emergence’ refers to ‘the gradual shaping of meaning through understanding and interpretation’; and it is because documents can allow us to focus on emergence that ‘they are helpful in understanding the process of social life’ (Altheide 1996, p. 10, emphasis in original).

I draw on critical discourse analysis techniques familiar from literary theory, and applied effectively as a method for social science research by Fairclough (2000, 2003). However, QMA differs from some other forms of discourse or content analysis in that it seeks to examine documents in their wider context, rather than focusing on a linguistic study of text; it is an interactionist approach, which allows an analysis of media content within the framework of broader social and cultural developments. Situating discourse analysis within its wider social, political and cultural context, it is possible to discern historical patterns and relations between events that may not, on the surface, seem to have anything to do with the problem under consideration, but which

turn out to have a significant impact upon the way it is constructed. For example in this study, I found that recent global economic crisis, and the election of US President Bill Clinton in 1992, were influential in framing the Baby Boomer problem even where these events were not specifically discussed.

### **3.4.1 The cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem**

My interest in the concept of the cultural script arises from the way cultural products both illustrate and frame a society's understanding of phenomena in a particular historical period. This is intimately connected to a discussion of generations. Significant anthropological and historical contributions to the field of generational study have focused on cultural symbols and *rites de passage* as crucial elements in the ways that societies manage the problem of generations (see for example Abrams 1970, Eisenstadt 1956, Gillis 1997), and it is clear that the question of generations has primarily (though not exclusively) been an area of cultural, rather than directly political, interest.

My decision to focus on newspapers, and to begin with a search of the *Times*, was deliberate. I considered that newspapers, rather than other media sources (eg television, online, periodicals) would provide the most manageable indication of a cultural product accessed by a significant proportion of the population. Some powerful examples of media analysis focus on different, and arguably more popular, media: for example, Altheide's own (1976) groundbreaking work *Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events* fuelled my interest in media analysis as a research method. The internet has also emerged as a powerful source of news and discussion in recent years, and has been identified as a potentially significant new factor in the development of generational consciousness (Edmunds and Turner 2005).

However, for this study, the printed news media seemed to provide a more established vehicle for cultural transmission (Swidler and Ardit 1994, pp. 307-8), particularly as I wished to study the development of the Baby Boomer problem over a number of years, predating the internet and the ubiquity of television news that we have today. Because of the relatively longer segments afforded by newspaper articles than TV reports, text also seemed to offer a clearer exposition of linguistic subtlety

than television news: the material cited in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 indicates that the Baby Boomer problem has not generally been discussed in the form of ‘soundbites’, but through a relatively fluid and ambivalent narrative.

Above all, in setting out to analyse the construction of the Baby Boomer problem, I was interested in studying the development and articulation of this problem at the level of the political and cultural elite. While newspapers are considered part of the ‘mass media’, they are highly editorialised and often clearly partisan, in contrast to the more inclusive character of the blogosphere and recent forms of ‘citizen journalism’. Future research could be conducted to assess the extent to which this cultural script has been internalised at the level of informal knowledge (Swidler and Ardit 1994). However, given the way that the recent high-profile critiques of the Baby Boomer generation highlighted in Chapter 1 have emanated from those in political and cultural institutions, an examination of this problem as an elite phenomenon seemed to be the logical first step.

A further limitation of this study is that it focuses on the British media only. The literature indicates that the Baby Boomer problem has an international character, articulated in various countries in the Western world; and my research confirms the extent to which the problem in Britain has been framed and shaped by a process of diffusion from the USA. A comparative study of Britain and the USA would be a valuable endeavour, and draw out much more clearly the differences and similarities in which these two societies have constructed the Baby Boomer problem. My decision not to conduct such a study here was based on the sheer volume of material and the wealth of contextual differences, making it difficult confidently to review all the relevant material and do justice to the complexity of the issues as they played out in these two distinct societies. This study, of the construction of the Baby Boomer problem in Britain, should make the future task of designing comparative studies more manageable.

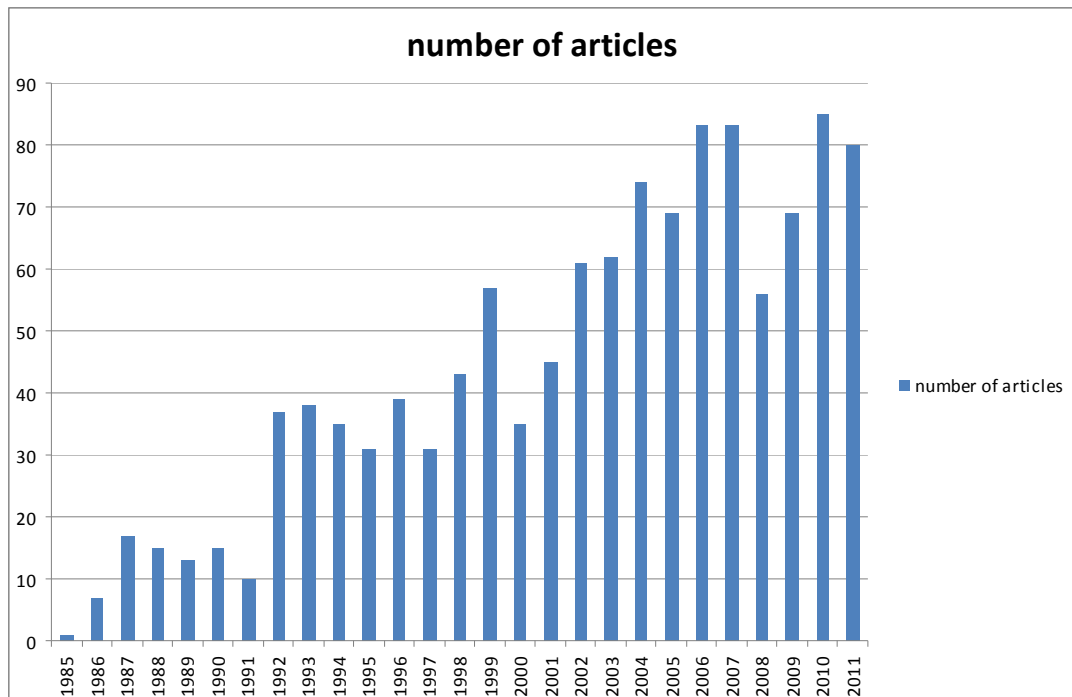
### **3.4.2 Quantitative analysis of interest in the Baby Boomers over time**

To begin my investigation into the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem, I conducted a Nexis search of the *Times* (London)<sup>5</sup> from January 1985 to December 2011 using the terms ‘baby’ and ‘boomer’. This yielded a total of 1,191 articles, with the number of articles containing this term rising as time goes on (Figure 3, below). Nexis was attractive as a search tool as the text it collects from newspapers is static – unlike search engines such as Google, or newspapers’ own digital archives, where material is being constantly added and thus creates complications when conducting searches on more than one occasion, or returning to searches to confirm results. My choice of the *Times* for the preliminary dataset was because this is an elite, established, broadsheet newspaper, and I anticipated that the results from this newspaper would indicate the ‘official’ interest in the Baby Boomer, and the way this problem is shaped from an elite perspective.

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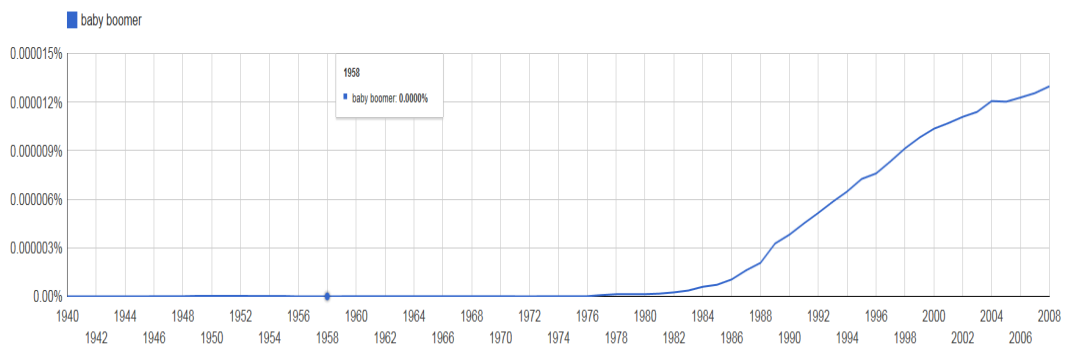
<sup>5</sup> Not including the *Sunday Times*.

**Figure 3: Number of articles mentioning ‘baby’ and ‘boomer’ from the *Times*, 1985-2011**



This preliminary quantitative analysis confirmed the impression given by the wider literature about the extent to which interest in the ‘Baby Boomers’ has gathered pace over recent years. This wider interest, on an international level, is graphically illustrated below, in the number of books about the Baby Boomers that have been published (and collated by Google books) in the postwar period.

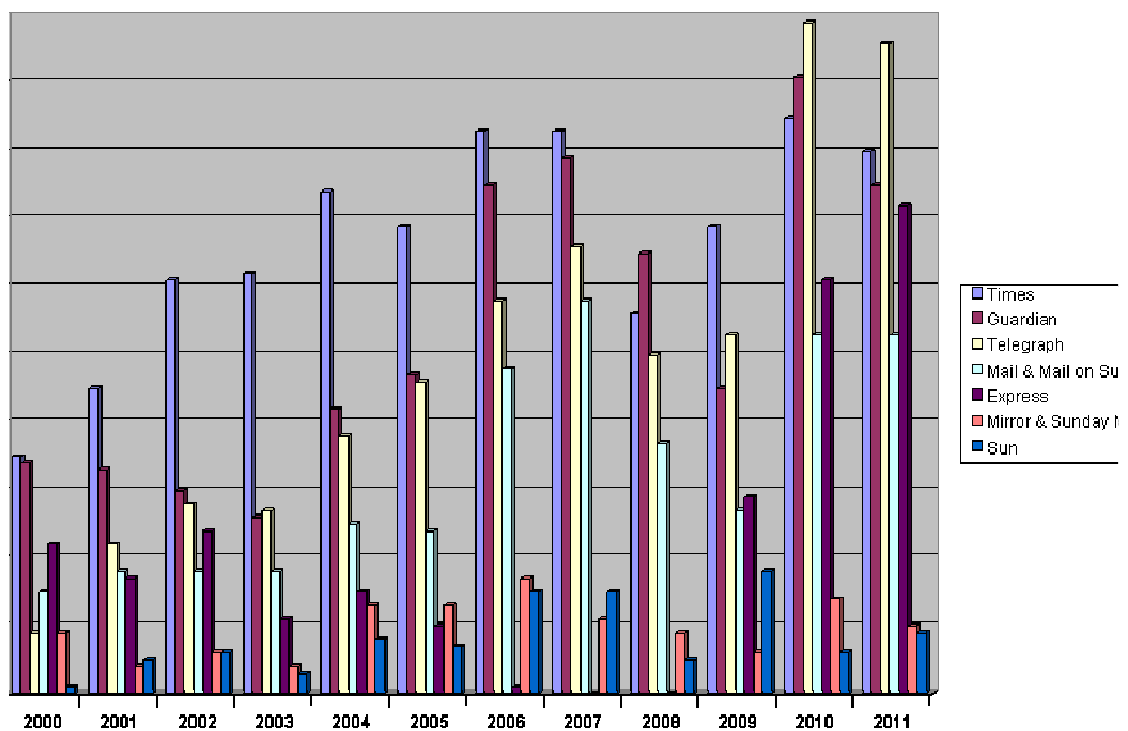
**Figure 4: Search of books collated by Google, using the keywords ‘baby boomer’**



Source: Google Ngram Viewer, 15 October 2013

However, having collated results from the *Times*, it was necessary to confirm that the rising interest in the Baby Boomers (as indicated by the increased use of the terms ‘baby’ and ‘boomer’) was not a phenomenon restricted to the *Times* alone. I then conducted a search across the other British national newspapers (broadsheet and tabloid) from 2000-2011, which reveals a similar rise in interest in the ‘Baby Boomer’.

**Figure 5: Number of articles mentioning ‘baby’ and ‘boomer’ from the *Times*, *Guardian*, *Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*, *Express*, *Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror*, and the *Sun*, 2000-2011**



The results of this search of a cross-section of national newspapers confirmed that there has been increased interest in the ‘Baby Boomer’ since the year 2000 across the UK press. The search further confirmed that the interest is shared by the tabloid press,

but at a lower level than the broadsheets (although it should be noted that each edition of a tabloid newspaper has fewer articles overall than a broadsheet paper, so we might expect fewer articles to be yielded that reference the baby boomers). The relatively low number of articles published in the *Sun* that reference this term, compared to those in the *Times*, indicated that the baby boomers are not a ‘Murdoch obsession’ –they hold interest for papers of different political persuasions, and with different ownership and editorial structures.

### **3.4.3 Qualitative analysis of newspaper articles**

Having established that interest in the Baby Boomers exists across the board, it was necessary to find a more precise way of analysing the data. I considered that I needed a dataset that was indicative of changes in the discourse over time, and differences in the discourse between differently-oriented newspapers. I also wanted to find a means to provide a qualitative analysis of the material generated by the Boolean searches. For these reasons, I took the following steps.

Following my initial search of the *Times*, I imported the text of all the articles from the *Times* between January 1985 and December 2011 (n=1,191) into NVivo (Version 9). This enabled me to code the articles according to the themes that emerged as I was reading them. I began with the first six years’ worth of articles (date period 1985-1990; n=68), and developed a list of themes including the following: ageing, consumption, debt, disillusionment, economy, education, environmentalism, housing, jobs, lifestyle, marriage and divorce, media, mid-life crisis, mortality, music, obesity, optimism, parenting, pensions, politics and protest, population, Sixties, style and fashion, time, TV and film, values, Vietnam, wealth.

I also coded the articles according to their date of publication, which allowed me to see whether the number of articles had increased over this time period. Furthermore, I coded the articles according to the country about which they were written: in line with the inductive approach that I took to this phase of the research, it quickly became apparent that the focus of many of the articles was the USA, which struck me as relevant to the question of whether the Baby Boomer problem had ‘diffused’ from a different national context. For example, I found that 38 of the articles



(56 per cent) focused on the UK, while 27 (40 per cent) focused on the USA. I also noted that many of the articles were written by the *Times* journalist Charles Bremner, who was then based in New York (and in some cases writing a column headed 'Letter from New York'): Bremner's byline appeared on 15 (22 per cent) of the relevant articles published by the *Times* from 1985 to 1990.

This initial research exercise proved valuable in indicating research avenues to explore further, and also in highlighting the limitations of NVivo alone as a research tool for analysing the entire dataset. By coding the earliest five years' worth of available articles according to date, place and theme, I was struck by the value of quantitative element of the findings, and motivated to research in greater depth the number of articles published relevant to my research question – both in the *Times* and in competing newspapers. Coding the articles according to theme highlighted the breadth and diversity of the topics associated with the Baby Boomer, and it was apparent that a satisfactory discussion of how the Baby Boomer became constructed as a social problem would need to engage with this breadth of themes (rather than, for example, focusing simply on the idea of the Baby Boomer as an 'economic' or 'environmental' problem). However, the inductive method that I had been using with the initial 68 articles seemed inadequate as a way of pursuing this task, when dealing with several hundred articles.

For the next stage, I developed a theoretical sampling technique along the lines outlined by Altheide (1996, pp. 18-23) to develop a sample small enough to allow for in-depth qualitative analysis that was still able to show the development of the cultural script over time. For Altheide, one important element of QMA is its ability to show how a media issue develops into a 'common culture' assumption. This arises from an interaction between 'producers' assumptions of sharing a common culture with their audience – that is, "we'd be interested in this", and an 'awareness of what other popular culture messages have been presented'. He continues:

If a report reflects 'common culture' assumptions (e.g., common fears), and other media outlets have presented similar reports, then it is 'obvious' to any competent member of the organization seeking to provide viewers with 'what

they want' that they should participate in what by then has become 'what all America is talking about'. (Altheide 1996, p. 19)

Altheide's discussion of 'common culture' assumptions in relation to the US television news can be usefully adapted to study the development of the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem in British newspapers. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 discuss the way in which, over time, certain claims about the Baby Boomer generation have hardened into 'common sense' assumptions, although earlier material challenges many of these claims or presents them in a different light. The challenge for this study, then, was to find a way of tracking the way claims have developed, shifted and hardened into the narrative of the Baby Boomer problem that dominates in the present day. For this, theoretical sampling provided the most suitable vehicle. Theoretical sampling encapsulates a reflexive and non-linear approach to document analysis, in contrast to the 'static' approach offered by random sampling; by engaging the researcher in a process of 'constant discovery', it enables the identification of 'important thematic patterns' (Altheide 1996, p. 21).

Having established that an important goal of this study was to analyse the development of the Baby Boomer problem over time, it was necessary to find a way of breaking down the initial dataset into a sample that could be analysed qualitatively. Bearing in mind that the articles generated by the *Times* alone numbered 1,191 in total, if I wished to study material from a wider range of newspapers, I would end up with an unwieldy sample numbering thousands of articles. I therefore took the following steps to generate a theoretical sample.

First, I focused on four of the seven national newspapers that I initially searched for articles using the term 'baby' and 'boomer'<sup>6</sup> (see Figure 5, above). By focusing on the *Times*,<sup>7</sup> the *Guardian* (and *Observer*), the *Daily Mail* (and *Mail on Sunday*) and the *Mirror* (and *Sunday Mirror*), I intended to incorporate findings from

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<sup>6</sup> When I repeated the searches using the term 'baby boomer', the same results were generated.

<sup>7</sup> The decision not to include the *Sunday Times* in this sample was based on two factors. First, Nexis catalogues the *Sunday Times* as a separate paper from the *Times*, perhaps reflecting the fact that the *Sunday Times* has a more distinct structure and editorial stance than do the Sunday papers attached to the *Guardian*, *Mail* and *Mirror*. Second, given that the *Times* appears to have 'led' the rising interest in the Baby Boomers (see Figure 3.3 above), I was concerned that including the *Sunday Times* in the study would give disproportionate weight to the *Times* newspapers.

across the political spectrum, and from the non-broadsheet press. (In the event, the fact that there was, overall, relatively little discussion of the Baby Boomers in the tabloid press meant that the *Mirror* barely features in the final analysis, although the *Mail* yields some useful data.)

Second, using the data illustrated by Figure 3, above, I focused on particular date periods in which a heightened interest in the Baby Boomers was shown, using datasets of two-year periods in order to allow for a proper grasp of the context in which particular discussions were taking place. These were:

- 1986-7, 1992-3, 1998-9, 2006-7, 2010-11.

Even having narrowed down the range of papers and the dates studied, I was left with an unwieldy dataset, of well over 1,000 articles. Again using theoretical sampling techniques, I narrowed down the number of articles for analysis by, first, using NVivo to code the earliest two datasets for key themes. The dataset of 1986-7 was relatively small, comprising only 34 articles; 4 were discarded as not relevant to the study, and I produced a qualitative analysis of the remaining 30. The dataset of 1992-3 was much larger, comprising 206 articles; I sorted the results by relevance and analysed 83 articles in depth, before becoming confident that I had identified the dominant theme of the dataset (the election of Bill Clinton as the USA's first 'Baby Boomer' president) and also picked up on themes that were not related to the Clinton election.

Having completed the analysis of these two datasets, combined with the preliminary analysis of the *Times* discussed above and my reading of the recent grey literature, I was confident that I had a good understanding of the breadth of themes running through media discourse about the Baby Boomers, which would enable me to adopt a more selective approach with later datasets.

My first approach was to combine the results of the coding with key-word searches on Nexis, using the terms 'baby' AND 'boomer' AND... [third term here]. The third term was drawn from the 16 principal the nodes generated by the qualitative analysis of the datasets so far: economy, housing, work, pension, politics, environment,

culture, education, music, lifestyle, drug, drink, sex, health, aging/ageing, youth. Running these combined searches through Nexis generated an interesting insight in the extent to which the Baby Boomers were linked with particular discussions, and also indicated change over time and relative to other issues.

However, there were some clear problems with this approach. That the use of particular terms rose over time could not be easily distinguished from the fact that there were more articles about the Boomers in general. Certain words (for example, 'work') had a number of meanings – so Nexis would pinpoint articles that associated Baby Boomers with (for example) how certain drugs or technologies 'worked'. There was also a danger that this approach could become self-fulfilling, in terms of reading into articles particular specific themes when the broader scope of the articles raised new, or more significant, discussions.

For these reasons, I decided to use the coding exercise as a useful piece of background research, and pursue a more inductive, qualitative approach for the remainder of the study. This involved developing a sample small enough for me to read each article in depth, and organise thematically in each date period. I added the additional date period of 2008-9, as this emerged as important in illuminating the extent to which the cultural script of the Boomer problem has hardened into a more coherent narrative over the past decade. The final study thus focused on the following date periods:

- 1986-7, 1992-3, 1998-9, 2006-7, 2008-9, 2010-11.

As described above, I had already analysed the datasets from 1986-7 and 1992-3 in depth. With the remaining datasets (encompassing the overall period 1998-2011), I used the Nexis facility to sort the results by relevance, and analysed the 'most relevant' 10 per cent, on occasion discarding articles within this bracket for duplication. The number of articles for each data period were entered into Excel, and those selected for detailed analysis were analysed to draw out thematic parallels and divergences. Details of all the articles (author, title, date, newspaper) comprising the final study are provided in Appendix 1. Table 3.1 below shows the numbers and proportions analysed

from each dataset. In total, I conducted an in-depth qualitative media analysis of 268 articles published between 1986 and 2011.

**Table 1: Datasets used for Qualitative Media Analysis**

<b>Date period</b>	<b>Total number of articles found by Nexis search</b>	<b>Number of articles analysed</b>
1986-7	34	30
1992-3	206	83
1998-9	270	26
2006-7	448	44
2008-9	341	35
2010-11	448	50
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,747</i>	<i>268</i>

From the data described above, it was possible to draw three initial observations about the construction of the Baby Boomer as a social problem in twenty-first century Britain:

- 1) Media interest in the Baby Boomer has grown over time, and appears to continue in an upwards trajectory;
- 2) Newspaper articles link the Baby Boomers to a range of social issues and personality attributes;
- 3) Which issues or attributes are linked to the Baby Boomer is related to the political, social and cultural context in which the article has been written.

The results of this analysis are detailed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

#### **3.4.4 Claimsmaking, rhetoric and the social problems process**

Best (2008) stresses the impact that resources and rhetoric have on each stage of the social problems process. Resources are significant because ‘[a]ctors are not equal. Some have more power, status, contacts, education, and money than others’ (p. 4). In other words, it really matters who makes claims about the social problem in question: if I think, for example, that the Baby Boomer is a social problem, this will not necessarily have any impact; but if a government minister believes this to be the case, this will have a profound effect on every aspect of the social problems process, from the extent to which this view is picked up by the media to the effect of this claim on policymaking.

Rhetoric is significant because ‘[a]ny troubling condition can be understood in various ways’, and ‘[a]t each stage of the social problems process, a troubling condition can be reconstructed to fit the concerns of the actors involved in that stage’ (Best 2008, p. 24). Best’s emphasis on rhetoric confirms the importance of analysing the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem: its features, and the way it has changed over time. My research indicates that the expansive character of the Baby Boomer problem has enabled the rhetoric of this problem to shift according to the concerns of the actors involved in the process, and also according to the wider context in which claims are articulated. Thus, we can see that the rhetorical linkage of the Baby Boomer to concerns about the economy, the welfare state, or the crisis of the family (for example) changes according to the wider concerns held by the media, policymakers and the public at any particular time.

The findings of this study illuminate a number of elements of the social problems process, as it relates to the construction of the Baby Boomer problem. The emergence of the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem is a study of the rhetoric used in claimsmaking activity, revealing what claims are made when, where and by whom and also, importantly, *how* these claims are articulated in different ways at different times. The analysis of claimsmaking, in turn, highlights the high levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) held by claimsmakers in this discussion, who tend to work in politics, policymaking and the media; thus, the translation of claims into policymaking and policy outcomes can, at least potentially, take place rapidly and seamlessly.

However, this study also revealed a curious difference with the social problems process modelled by Best (2008), and represented by Figure 6 below.

**Figure 6: The social problems process**

Claimsmaking	Media coverage	Public reaction	Policymaking	Social problems work	Policy outcomes
People make claims that there is a social problem, with certain characteristics, causes, and solutions.	Media report on claimsmakers so that news of the claims reaches a broader audience.	Public opinion focuses on the social problem identified by the claimsmakers.	Lawmakers and others with the power to set policies create new ways to address the problem.	Agencies implement the new policies, including calls for further changes.	There are various responses to the new arrangements.

Source: Best (2008).

I had expected to find that claims about the Baby Boomers as a social problem would first be made by campaigners, or lobby groups, which became incorporated into mainstream media and political discourse because of their resonance with wider ideas. Talk of an emerging ‘generation war’, as described in Chapter 1, and the angry rhetoric that positioned young people as having been ‘jilted’ or robbed of ‘their future’ by their elders, implied the existence of some kind of organised campaign based on grassroots resentment.

Yet my study appears to indicate that such campaigns do not exist. Youth organisations are not mobilising against the Baby Boomers; high-profile age-based organisations such as Saga and Age UK offer, at most, a weak defence of the newly-retired; and such campaigns that have aimed explicitly to highlight the problem of intergenerational equity, such as the Intergenerational Foundation in Britain and the Americans for Generational Equity in the USA, have been created by senior political figures and journalists who have already established themselves as claimsmakers in this regard. In other words: the construction of the Baby Boomer problem appears, from this study, to be a phenomenon of the political and cultural elite, articulated by a

small number of claimsmakers. This finding, and its implications, is elaborated further in Chapter 5.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the theoretical orientation and methodology behind my study of the construction of the Baby Boomer generation as a problem in Britain. The study draws on two core aspects of the sociology of knowledge – the sociology of generations, and the construction of social problems – and its aim is to provide an original contribution to this field, through qualitative analysis of the development of the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem in the British national press over the past 26 years. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 discuss the findings from my study, drawing further upon the relevant literature where it helps to ground the findings within their historical and cultural context.



## **Chapter 4 The cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem in 2010-11**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter analyses the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem as presented by the national British media between January 2010 and December 2011. The articles discussed here support many of the earlier observations by Phillipson *et al.* (2008), about the ways that Boomers are depicted in media narratives. However, by focusing on the particular period of 2010-11, we are able to see the extent to which this narrative has hardened in the most recent years into the presentation of the Boomer generation as a particular character type. This in turn deepens our understanding of the ‘rhetorical practice of “people production”’ (Loseke 2003, p. 120).

By looking at which individuals come to the fore in articulating the cultural script of the Boomer problem, we can also gain insights into the claimsmaking process highlighted by Best (2003, 2008) in the construction of social problems. As noted, 2010 was the date in which three influential books articulating the Baby Boomer problem were published – David Willetts’s *The Pinch*, Francis Beckett’s *What Did the Baby Boomers Ever Do For Us*, and *Jilted Generation*, by Howker and Malik – and many of the articles discussed here are reviews of, or reflections on, the claims made by these four individuals, who already enjoy prominent positions within the political and/or cultural elite.

Beyond that, we can see a handful of other claimsmakers within the media and academic world offer their own contribution to the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem. These include: the historian Dominic Sandbrook, author of a two-volume history of the Sixties, writing in the *Daily Mail*; the political economist and former *Observer* editor Will Hutton; the economist Anatole Kaletsky, Editor-at-Large of the *Times*; Sarah Vine, Beauty Editor of the *Times* until 2013, and wife of the Education Secretary; the political commentator Peter Osborne, writing in the *Daily Mail*; and Fiona Millar, writing in the *Guardian*. Millar campaigns on education and parenting issues, was formerly an advisor to the barrister Cherie Blair, and Millar’s partner is Alastair Campbell, formerly Director of Communications and Strategy for Tony Blair, the former prime minister.

As claimsmakers, the individuals listed above have significant cultural, political, personal, and financial resources at their disposal. Their relationship with the media means that their rhetorical accounts of the Baby Boomer problem can be promoted in a direct and unmediated way. These insights enable us to understand in more depth the role of resources and rhetoric (Best 2008) in the construction of this cultural script. Even though, as I discuss later, the Boomer problem is articulated by a relatively small group of people, it can have a disproportionate effect on media discourse.

## **4.2 The top five Boomer attributes**

Analysis of newspaper articles from the years 2010-11 indicates that the contemporary cultural script endows the Baby Boomers with five key attributes:

- The lucky generation
- The affluent generation
- The large generation
- The selfish generation
- The reckless generation

Below, I draw on the 2010-11 dataset to substantiate these observations, and reflect on what has emerged as a defining metaphor of the problem of the Baby Boomers: that this generation ‘threw a party’ and has left their children to ‘clear up the mess’.

### **4.2.1 The lucky generation**

Overridingly, the Boomers are portrayed as a ‘lucky’ generation: ‘the luckiest people in history: the richest, most secure and most powerful generation the world has ever seen’:

While their parents scrimped and sacrificed through the Depression and World War II, they basked in the long boom of an affluent society. The first were

children in the prosperous Fifties and teenagers in the Swinging Sixties. They bought their first homes in the Seventies and saw their mortgages wiped out by inflation. Others made their money in the Eighties and Nineties, and are now looking forward to a long, healthy and wellremunerated retirement... From free school milk and handsome benefits, to cheap holidays, women's liberation and the shopping revolution, they have enjoyed comforts their parents could barely have dreamed about. (Sandbrook 2010, *Daily Mail*)

The Boomers 'enjoyed a life of free love, free school meals, free universities, defined benefit pensions, mainly full employment and a 40-year-long housing boom' (Hutton 2010, *Observer*). They were luckier than the generation before them: the Baby Boomers are 'spoilt brats' who 'weren't forced into trenches or air-raid shelters', 'had the best of the NHS and free higher education', and were '[t]he first generation to be sexually liberated, enjoy regular foreign travel, cheap mortgages, job security and solid pensions' (Reade 2011, *Mirror*). But they were also luckier than those who followed, having 'few of the worries that young people face today':

They grew up in an era of full employment, when under-25s could choose from a wide range of jobs and could often afford to buy their own homes. And if they did go to university, they received not only free tuition, but also a generous grant to cover their living costs. (Howker and Malik 2010b, *Daily Mail*)

This means, writes Will Hutton, that '[a] 60-year-old in 2010 is a very privileged and lucky human being – an object of resentment as much as admiration' (Hutton 2010, *Observer*).

Over the past 26 years, the discourse of the Baby Boomers has indeed been underpinned by both admiration and resentment. In Chapter 6, I examine the way that the discussion about the Baby Boomers in the 1990s, much of which surrounded the election of US President Bill Clinton, was generally characterised by a (sometimes grudging and ambivalent) admiration for the 'sixties generation', which seemed to embody a much-needed orientation towards a new kind of political and cultural outlook. In the recent period, however, the sentiment is strongly weighed in the direction of resentment.

#### 4.2.2 The affluent generation

The luckiness of the Baby Boomers is attributed to two related features of their generational location. Because this generation was born and raised during the post-war economic boom, it grew up with both the reality and the expectation of lifelong affluence. Thus David Willetts writes that while the cultural ‘generation gap’ vividly portrayed by J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* has closed, it has been replaced by a new ‘economic’ gap. ‘In the 1960s young people rejected their parents’ values. Now young people are closer to their parents and share their values. But the generation gap takes a very different form,’ he states, claiming that history has ‘conspired’ to benefit the Boomers and penalise their children:

The irony is that those very teenage rebels who identified with Holden Caulfield, the baby-boomers born between 1945 and 1965, have ended up with all the money. I reckon that they own at least half of the nation’s wealth. At every stage of their lives economic circumstances have conspired to help them.

First, they borrowed to buy their first house, then high inflation in the 1970s and 1980s wiped out their debts. Then they had high wages when they were young. Now, as retirement looms, the arrival of China and India in the world trading system is holding down the wages of their children. And on top of that we are now leaving a heavy burden of public debt around their necks. (Willetts 2010b, *Times*)

Beyond the material benefits that they have enjoyed, the Boomers’ affluence allegedly gave them ‘a powerful sense of their own distinctiveness. Conceived amid the rubble of wartime, born and brought up in a society hurtling from austerity to affluence, they never ceased to remind themselves how special they were’ (Sandbrook 2011, *Daily Mail*). The connection made between affluence, a strong sense of self, and the enjoyment of new personal freedoms, is a powerful theme running through the 26-year sample of newspaper articles. ‘We were the first generation in which pretty well everyone could read and write fairly fluently,’ writes Francis Beckett. ‘We had the freedom that came from not having to fear starvation if your employer fired you; there

were other jobs to go to, and a welfare state to fall back on. These things made possible the freedom of the 1960s' (Beckett 2010b, *Guardian*).

Even those few articles within the 2010-11 dataset that question the extent to which the Baby Boomers should be blamed for the current social and economic malaise accept that this was indeed a lucky generation, made so by a combination of prosperity and social freedom. Thus, Ian Jack writes:

We grew up protected by a new welfare system. Grammar schools and further education grants promised and often delivered upward mobility. We were too young for national service and too old to be hurt by negative equity. The pill, house-price inflation, unprecedented wealth, relatively mild economic recessions, the end of social deference, no world wars: all these delivered pleasures and freedoms unknown to our parents, and we were wrapped inside a security blanket that won't be available to our children. So we have been luckier than the generations on either side. Whether we are morally inferior is a different question. (Jack 2011, *Guardian*)

The question of whether the Baby Boomers' luckiness makes them 'morally inferior' to previous and subsequent generations lies at the heart of the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem. It relates to the question of how far the Baby Boomers can be blamed for the current social and economic malaise, through their choices or behaviour. In this regard, the contemporary cultural script plays out in two main ways. First, the Boomers are positioned as a problem because of their actions: a 'selfish' generation, which 'squandered' its inheritance, personified by Boomer politicians for whom this powerful cohort voted to protect its own interests. Second, the generation acts as a proxy for the problem of affluence itself: in particular, with regard to freedom, knowledge, and choices. I develop these points in sections 4.2.4 and 4.2.5 below.

### **4.2.3 The large generation**

Part of the reason given for the Baby Boomers' luck, and the alleged selfishness of this generation's behaviour, is its 'sheer size and power' (Sandbrook 2010, *Daily Mail*). Here, the 'extended' demographic definition of the Boomer cohort described in

Chapter 1 is both explicitly and implicitly used. One feature of the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem in the period 2010-11 is that the definitions of the small, 'lucky' cohort – the 'quintessential baby-boomers' (Sandbrook 2011, *Daily Mail*) born in the 10 years directly after the Second World War – and the large, demographically powerful cohort tend to be fused together, with the result that it is implied that all those born between 1945 and 1965 had a similarly fortunate experience.

For example, Dominic Sandbrook's (2010) essay in the *Daily Mail*, headlined 'How the Baby Boomers bust Britain', talks of 'the generation born in the two decades following World War II' as 'the luckiest people in history'. Yet in an essay the following year, he defines the 'lucky generation' as the 'children conceived' a few days after VE Day and 'over the next ten years, during the peak of the post-war baby boom' (Sandbrook 2011, *Daily Mail*). In this later essay, Sandbrook allows that even members of this privileged cohort 'came from very different backgrounds and enjoyed very different fates', and indeed 'many resent the baby-boomer label'.

The extent to which this generation's size is seen as a decisive economic and social factor in the post-war period is summed up by Peter Osborne's review of Willetts's book *The Pinch*. Osborne presents the boom in the birthrate very much as an 'abnormal' experience. '[F]or the past three decades the baby boomers have been ascendant, and this has meant there have been an abnormally large proportion of people of working age,' he writes. 'As a consequence, we baby boomers have had to spend a lower proportion of our hard-earned cash looking after the young and the old than any previous generation.' This 'extraordinary demographic bonus' has meant 'far more money to spend on foreign holidays, large houses, restaurants and other luxuries'; but '[s]oon there will be a much smaller working population – and a much larger number of retired people expecting to be paid for by a much smaller number of wealth creators' (Osborne 2010, *Daily Mail*).

Here, Osborne refers to two key assumptions within the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem. The first is that the 'dependency ratio' between old and young is a decisive factor in the creation and maintenance of social and individual wealth, and that a rapid shift in this ratio will lead to the relative impoverishment of the generations

following the Baby Boomers. The second is that the age of affluence enjoyed by the Baby Boomers was a mere 'blip', borne out of a demographic peculiarity.

This latter point is emphasised by Anatole Kaletsky, in an article titled 'This is the age of war between the generations', which focuses on the 'unsustainable' character of a society dominated by Baby Boomers. 'Mr Willetts's book lucidly explains how this unsustainable situation came about through the interaction of demographics, economics and electoral politics,' writes Kaletsky. He continues:

It was not so much that the baby-boomers consciously intended to pay far less in taxes than they expect to take out of the social system in health and pension costs. Rather, he argues, the sheer size of the baby-boom generation gave temporarily exaggerated economic growth potential while the boomers were in their peak earning years, allowing politicians to win votes by increasing pension promises and reducing taxes. Now, with the male baby-boomers reaching 65 and starting to retire from 2010 onwards, the process will go into reverse. (Kaletsky 2010, *Times*)

For Kaletsky, the trigger for the current economic crisis was the 'huge liability, which governments have assumed for the baby-boomers' future pension and health costs, that makes public finances all over the world truly unsustainable'. Indeed, the economic crisis is itself a demographic one: 'From this point of view, the true significance of the 2007-09 financial crisis and bailouts was not to make public debts unsustainable, but simply to bring forward by about a decade the unsustainability caused by the ageing of the baby-boomers' (Kaletsky 2010, *Times*).

Chapter 5 examines the development of the claim that the Baby Boomer generation constitutes an economic problem, in part because of its demographic characteristics. Chapter 6 situates the current perception that the affluence enjoyed by the Boomers is an historical anomaly within a wider anxiety about the meaning and legacy of the Sixties. Here, it is simply worth stressing how, in the current discourse, the claim about the Baby Boomers' disproportionate use of public resources is given very high profile. '[C]ontrary to the fashionable belief that young people are a huge burden on society, public spending and facilities are heavily geared towards the baby

boomers, many of whom are now in comfortable retirement,' write Howker and Malik. 'Those aged over 60, regardless of their wealth, receive free bus passes and eye tests, as well as generous winter fuel payments... And for all the anguish about the young unemployed and teenage mothers abusing the welfare system, by far the largest proportion of the social security budget is spent on the elderly. Similarly, more than half of all NHS expenditure goes on pensioners' (Howker and Malik 2010b, *Daily Mail*).

Beyond the Boomers' disproportionate use of public resources, it is alleged that this generation's size has allowed it an 'unprecedented monopoly on jobs, houses and income' (Sandbrook 2010, *Daily Mail*), and even to 'dominate culture, fashion and morality' (Kaletsky 2010, *Times*). Such claims indicate that the problem is considered to be a broader one of cultural and existential domination, where the sheer size of the Baby Boomer generation is perceived to displace younger generations from society and hold them back from developing their own identity.

This idea lies at the heart of David Willetts's claim that the cultural gap between the generations has been replaced by an economic generation gap. 'Young people are stuck outside, their noses are pressed to the window, unable to get on the housing ladder, into a well-paid job or to build up a pension,' states Willetts. 'All this makes navigating the route to adulthood much harder' (Willetts 2010b, *Times*). In the present-day cultural script, the Boomers are presented as having 'taken their children's future' not only by using all the wealth, but also by having monopolised the means by which young people express themselves: through music, for example, or fashion or film.

There is no scope in this thesis to examine in detail the notion of a diminishing cultural gap between the generations, which is unfortunate: while the claim seems to hold a level of common-sense truth, it arguably sees expressions of the generation gap in particular ways that may not apply to the current era, and there are plenty of suggestions elsewhere of differences between the generations in attitudes to sexual relationships, the use of new technology, and political idealism, to name just a few. However, whatever evidence is that supports or contradicts Willetts's claim, the claim itself is important in the extent to which it encapsulates the sense of existential



dispossession that lies behind the current sensibility of the Baby Boomer problem. This point is explored in section 4.3, below.

It is interesting to note that the argument that all surrounding generations have been displaced by the Baby Boomers has been in existence in some form ever since the Baby Boomers were young themselves. Thus Sandbrook notes that at the beginning of 1960:

Britain's five million teenagers – most of them now grey-haired pensioners – commanded a tenth of the nation's personal income. They made up a third of the markets for cosmetics, magazines and cinema tickets, as well as almost half of the market for records and stereo equipment. Such was their clout, in fact, that an entire art form – pop and rock music, typified by home-grown bands such as The Beatles and The Stones – had emerged to satisfy their thirst for entertainment. (Sandbrook 2011, *Daily Mail*)

This notion, of a large and affluent group dominating both market and cultural trends over the course of their lifetimes, is reviewed in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

A further argument presented about the problem of the Boomer generation's size carries a distinctly Malthusian tone, where concerns about the 'terrifying time bomb' (Sandbrook 2010, *Daily Mail*) of population ageing in relation to the pensions and health care crises mesh with wider anxieties about population growth in general. Thus Sandbrook projects forwards towards 'a disturbing prospect' in Britain in 2045, where, 'with the last baby boomers still drawing pensions and benefits, paid for by the taxes of millions of immigrants, Britain could be a distressingly hectic, threadbare and overcrowded place', and 'total global demand for staples such as meat and water is likely to have doubled – meaning prices will shoot up and millions will have to go without' (Sandbrook 2010, *Daily Mail*).

Chapter 5 discusses the way in which the 'economic' problem of the Baby Boomers is framed both by concerns about population size in general, and also concerns about the relative size of one generation to another. I note that, when the Baby Boomers were in their infancy, some demographers aired the concern that this

generation would be *disadvantaged* by its relative size, as a greater number of coevals would be fighting over limited resources (Ryder 1965): a hypothesis that seems to be equally as plausible as the current consensus, which holds that the Baby Boomers' size is advantageous to members of that generation. The existence of contradictory projections of the social consequences of population size provides an implicit challenge to the notion that demographic characteristics have a determining impact, indicating rather that demography interacts with wider social and economic forces, which can shape whether a generation finds itself in a situation of (relative) affluence or scarcity at any particular historical moment.

#### **4.2.4 The selfish generation**

The observations that the Baby Boomer generation is large, and that it had the good fortune to come of age in a time of relative affluence, is not new to the present period. Media analysis of the past 26 years indicates that the significance attached to these attributes has, at times, been more shaded than it is in the current period; and it is arguably possible to view the observation that the Baby Boom generation was lucky, affluent and large as (relatively) neutral observations. However, in the cultural script of 2010-11, these observations have become moralised. The concept of moralisation is used here to express the way that an objective fact (the size or age of a demographic cohort, or its location in a particular historical period) is endowed with positive or negative qualities. Kaletsky's argument that 'the overwhelming size of the baby boom generation' allowed it to 'dominate' society, culture, and the economy, as well as to 'monopolise employment and housing and reduce social mobility for the next generation' (Kaletsky 2010, *Times*) exemplifies the way that the size of the Baby Boomer generation is intimately linked with the selfish behaviour that is attributed to it.

An article by the *Guardian's* economics correspondent Philip Inman, headlined 'Baby boomers aren't evil – just selfish', begins with the statement: 'As property owners and savers, the over-50s are undermining the economy'. 'Not only is the vast majority of housing equity in the hands of boomers, they also own most of the pensions – another area of economic activity where the selfish desire to maximise returns has a profound effect on the younger generation', Inman complains. 'Having

shaped the culture and values of the late 20th century, those of us who were born between the late 1940s and the early 1960s soaked up the benefits of generous company pension schemes, leaving nothing in the pot for our children,' confesses Millar (2010a), in her review of Willetts's book. Furthermore:

We hoovered up housing when it was affordable, then benefited from a massive house-price boom. Rather than saving some of that money for future generations, we borrowed against our assets and spent it all, a big black mark against us when it came to the recent banking crisis and the nation's current ability to invest in its future.

Our epic levels of consumption pose a huge environmental threat to subsequent (smaller) generations who will have to support us as we live longer, even though they entered the workforce just as globalisation and cheap labour were pushing down wage rates. (Inman 2011, *Guardian*)

The notion of the large, voracious Baby Boomer generation 'hoovering up' resources without thinking of the future, with the result that an enormous debt is left for their children, is a powerful theme running through this dataset. 'We baby boomers have been the most selfish generation that history has ever known,' writes Osborne (2010, *Daily Mail*):

We could have used our gigantic piece of demographic good fortune to build for the future. Instead, we have spent every last penny of our windfall gain. Indeed, we have done even worse than that. We have incurred gigantic debts that will have to be paid off by future generations – who will already be reeling under the necessity of paying for the largest number of pensioners in history.

The charge that the Baby Boomers have been selfishly careless with their 'demographic good fortune' is bolstered by the argument that they have deliberately hoarded wealth and opportunity, through exercising the disproportionate voting power that arises from the cohort's size. This enables them to 'mak[e] decision after decision to protect their wealth at the expense of the country's economic wellbeing' (Inman 2011, *Guardian*). Beckett cites research by the thinktank Demos that shows that 'because people are living longer, baby boomers are a more powerful political force

than 55-65-year-olds have ever been. Any government that fails to give the baby boomers what they want is in for severe punishment at the ballot box'. His article concludes by restating the problem of the voting power held by a large cohort, which, he argues, will deliberately skew the flow of resources in its own direction:

Opinion polls show that the now elderly baby boomers will use their voting power to ensure that when the bad times come, the young are hit first. When the baby boomers were young, they believed society could afford student grants; now they are old, they think it can afford pensions. Surely it can afford both. (Beckett 2010b, *Guardian*)

Kaletsy presents the exercise of generational interests through the ballot box in more confrontational terms. '[T]he baby boomers are so numerous that no politician dares to campaign against their interests,' he writes. 'Moreover, older people are more likely to vote. As a result democracies will increasingly be held hostage to the special interests of "grey panthers", whose power will steadily grow as more baby-boomers retire.' He concludes with a Swiftian 'modest proposal', which takes the arguments about generational warfare to their logical conclusion:

Will politics therefore degenerate into a conflict between the dwindling number of voters with children, who care about education and the future, and the massive power of pensioners with shorter time horizons? Here is a modest proposal to avert this awful outcome. Since children under 18 are not allowed to vote, perhaps pensioners could be deprived of the right to vote after 75 or 80. An equally effective alternative would be to give mothers an extra vote for every child under voting age. Since no such reforms are ever likely, I look forward to the Greek Government being forced to sell the Parthenon – and to Oxford and Cambridge being turned into luxury old people's homes. (Kaletsy 2010, *Times*)

An extension of the anxiety about the Baby Boomers' voting power is the way that, in 2010-11, the self-interested decisions made by the Baby Boomers are often equated with the decisions made by the New Labour government under Tony Blair, prime minister between 1997 and 2007, and his successor Gordon Brown, both of

whom, '[b]orn in 1953 and 1951 respectively', were 'products of the fag end of the baby boom' (Sandbrook 2011, *Daily Mail*). 'Since New Labour came to power, the net financial wealth of a couple in their early 30s has fallen by two-thirds, while the wealth of people in their late 50s has almost trebled,' writes Sandbrook; and '[f]or more than half a century, the generation of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown has been living it up, borrowing and spending in the conviction the money wouldn't run out' (Sandbrook 2010, *Daily Mail*). The current economic crisis is, in Sandbrook's view, an indictment of the political and moral values of the Boomer generation as much as it is the misguided decisions of Britain's political leaders:

The truth is that too often with this generation a cherished pursuit of personal freedom turned into self-indulgent individualism. And too often, as in the case of that perma-tanned freeloader Tony Blair, their complacent assumptions of success curdled into vanity and hubris. (Sandbrook 2011, *Daily Mail*)

Sarah Vine paints a similarly contemptuous picture of the New Labour government, comparing its leaders to the protagonists of the cult BBC sit-com *Absolutely Fabulous*. 'Since Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, the Patsy and Edina of modern politics, finally passed out in the metaphorical bath of Westminster, the scene of devastation has been coming into focus,' she writes:

The cellar has been plundered and the family silver has mysteriously disappeared. The wardrobe is full of expensive, unwearable clothes, the bathroom cabinet is stuffed with half-used tubs of £500 moisturiser and the electricity is about to be cut off. (Vine 2010, *Times*)

Vine continues: 'Massive debt; endless quangos; expensive, half-hearted initiatives; vested interests; waste: that was some wild party Labour had themselves'.

From commentators such as Dominic Sandbrook, writing in the *Daily Mail*, and Sarah Vine, wife of the current (Conservative) Education Secretary, an attempt to endow the previous New Labour government with the most negative 'Baby Boomer' attributes might not be surprising. However, it is notable that those who are self-consciously attached to the liberal left also attack Labour's Baby Boomer prime

minister. 'Harold Wilson saved the baby boomers from having to fight alongside young Americans in Vietnam,' writes Beckett in the *Guardian*. 'When the baby boomer generation formed a government, its prime minister, Tony Blair, told lies to the young so that he could send them to fight in Iraq' (Beckett 2010b).

As I discuss in Chapters 5 and 6, a certain amount of disquiet about the Baby Boomers' voting power has existed for some years, and has been particularly apparent in the US discussion of 'Boomer advocacy', in the form of the American Association of Retired People (AARP) and other generation-oriented pressure groups, and the election of Bill Clinton as the first 'Boomer president'. Here, I simply note that the theme that the Baby Boomers have 'squandered' the inheritance of subsequent generations appears across the political spectrum, although it takes slightly different forms.

For example, in the sample of British newspaper articles from 2010-11, articles by Willetts (2010b), Sandbrook (2010, 2011), Osborne (2010) and Millar (2010a, 2010b) emphasise the problem of reckless consumption, the normalisation of public and private debt, and the increased reliance on the welfare state, hastened by the Baby Boomers' alleged role in the demise of the family, church and other traditional institutions. '[U]s baby boomers have not just squandered our relatively benign financial inheritance,' writes Osborne. 'We have also wrecked the social fabric of society by destroying the family, which Willetts shows has been the bedrock of British society for millennia. The state has been obliged to pick up the terrible financial consequences of the wreckage' (Osborne 2010, *Daily Mail*).

Beckett's critique, on the other hand, is focused on the Baby Boomers' failure to *protect* the welfare state. 'And what did we do with this wonderful inheritance? We trashed it,' he writes. 'We created a far harsher world for our children to grow up in. It was as though we decided that the freedom and lack of worry that we had inherited was too good for our children, and we pulled up the ladder we had climbed. Six decades after its birth, the welfare state is in the worst danger it has known' (Beckett 2010b, *Guardian*) In an article published one year later, Beckett (2011) provides an interesting insight into the way that claims about the problem of the Baby Boomers are informed by a number of different perspectives and agendas. 'Delighted to see Jeremy

Paxman in the *Daily Mail* this week reigniting righteous anger against us baby boomers, especially as he quotes my book liberally. But the argument is becoming the opposite of what I intended,' he writes, before going on to bemoan the way that the popular critique of the Baby Boomers has meshed with the policy trajectory to cut back the welfare state that Beckett is so keen to defend (Beckett 2011, *Guardian*).

The way that 'opposite' claimsmaking – such as those presented by the Beckett and Willetts camps about the problem of the welfare state – coalesces into very similar arguments regarding the problem of the Baby Boomers is one of the most striking findings to emerge from this study. The cultural script in 2010-11 shows a high level of consensus about the negative attributes that the Baby Boomers are seen to possess, and the extent to which they are considered responsible for the problems of today. This consensus seems to indicate more about the way in which contemporary society's understanding of social problems has changed than about objective facts about the Baby Boomer generation. When matters of social organisation – even political decision-making – are perceived in generational terms, rather than as questions of politics or economics, it becomes difficult to achieve clarity about where divisions lie.

One striking finding of this study, following Mannheim, is the absence of sensitivity to the fact that, within the Baby Boomer generation as a whole, there will exist people with a wide range of experiences and outlooks. This should make equating generational location with political decision-making a difficult (and undesirable) task. An implicit understanding of the role played by 'generation units' (as opposed to entire generations) in defining the *Zeitgeist* is occasionally hinted at in earlier newspaper articles – through the observations reviewed in Chapter 6, for example, that while former US president Bill Clinton was widely perceived to represent the archetypal Baby Boomer, his successor (and coeval) George W. Bush was very different both in terms of political outlook and the personality that he projected to the world. However, the 2010-11 dataset gives the overall impression that all the Baby Boomer conform to one particular political outlook and character type.

One article that does attempt to account for the different 'types' of Baby Boomers is Fiona Millar's review of Beckett's book, *What Did The Baby Boomers Ever Do For Us?* Observing that 'the baby boomers of the liberal 60s/early 70s split

into various tribes from the 80s on, and our legacy leaves a lot to be desired’, she writes:

Put crudely those tribes included the economic liberals and individualists who fell behind Thatcher, and who reduced the generous 60s concept of ‘freedom’ to mean merely economic freedom. They then ruthlessly promoted this philosophy through the rightwing media or made a lot of money in the City.

Then there were the woolly liberal boomers on the idealistic left, who triangulated into New Labour, making decisions over coffee in the PM’s den. Beckett maintains that this lot were in thrall to management gurus and meaningless feelgood words such as ‘modernisation’, ‘innovation’ and ‘stakeholder’ that were the inferior but direct descendents of the loose hippy language of the 60s. (Millar 2010b, *Guardian*)

Millar goes on to describe the Baby Boomer generation almost as a political movement: ‘Both groups also provided a comfortable berth for extremist boomers, who found it as easy to police Thatcherite or Blairite ideological purity as they had previously policed the certainties of the hard left. The general cynicism about politics today suggests that many less hardline, but equally idealistic, boomers feel disenchanted with the way it all turned out’. The extent to which it is possible to make a convincing claim about the Baby Boomers holding a defined political ideology born out of their generational location is examined in Chapter 6.

#### **4.2.5 The reckless generation**

Arguing that ‘this generational slanging match is the wrong political argument to be having’, not least because of ‘how neatly it flows into the Osborne narrative of brutal deficit cutting’, Madeleine Bunting writes:

Lurking in *Jilted Generation* is a much more interesting argument which is heavily influenced by Richard Sennett’s brilliant 1998 book, *The Corrosion of Character*. It is about ‘how our society considers the past and the future – our relationship with time’. Howker and Malik argue that a short-termism, an



absorption in immediate gains rather than investing in the future, has contaminated our politics. (Bunting 2010, *Guardian*)

‘This collective political failure is mirrored in individual lives in another kind of failure,’ writes Bunting, noting that Howker and Malik ‘quote Sennett’s plaint, “how can long-term purposes be pursued in a short-term society... how can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments”’. Bunting’s concluding paragraphs indicate the extent to which she accepts the argument that the younger generation face an uncertain future – ‘I see all kinds of parents making huge efforts to ensure their children are happy, but niggling away in the back of their minds is the disturbing thought that they must prepare their children for lives which could be much harder than their own’.

In response to Bunting, Howker and Malik deny that ‘we blame our parents for all this’. ‘Parents really aren’t selfish; they haven’t “stolen their children’s future”’, they write. ‘You only need to ask the millions of them continuing to subsidise their offspring’s income and housing long past the point when they leave education’. Attempting to distance themselves from ‘Willetts’ thesis that a baby boom – a population spike in the middle of the 20th century – somehow explains all this’, the authors of *The Jilted Generation* argue:

Instead, there are profound issues at stake: about how we address globalisation; about the failures of neo-liberalism; about our inability to find mechanisms for alleviating poverty and worklessness that look beyond an eternity of cash subsidies alone... Our point is that, for decades now, political leaders of the left and the right have constantly ducked them, as if gripped by epidemic short-termism. (Howker and Malik 2010c, *Guardian*)

In this way, the claim that the Baby Boomers have wittingly, selfishly squandered their children’s inheritance is modified by some critics, who focus on what they perceive as a wider problem of reckless liberalisation or short-termism. Hutton expresses this point as follows: ‘There is no longer any discrimination in our embrace of cultural liberalism; it stretches into every nook and cranny of our lives – from the financial

markets to sex – and sometimes with consequences none of us like’ (Hutton 2010, *Observer*).

Hutton’s essay, published in response to ‘a cluster of recent anti-boomer books’, provides a lengthy attempt to grapple with what he sees as the ‘paradox’ of the modern age: ‘more freedom but more angst and uncertainty’. He begins by reviewing the situation of the Baby Boomer within the widely-noted insecurity of the modern world:

Individually, we may not have been the authors of today’s flux, uncertainty and lack of social and cultural anchors, but we were at the scene of the crime. The cultural, economic and institutional cornerstones of British life have been shattered – and the way our love of fun was channelled is undoubtedly part of the story. The upside is that some of the old stifling prohibitions and prejudices have gone, hopefully for ever. But the downside is that we have become authors of our own lives without society offering us a compass to follow. (Hutton 2010, *Observer*)

In providing examples of this ‘downside’, Hutton cites both the greater permissiveness in intimate relationships – ‘What, for example, should men and women expect of each other as they make the lifelong commitment to marriage? Have families become too child-centred to the detriment of our kids – mollycoddling and overprotecting them?’ – and the disorganisation of institutions of the state: ‘Social landmarks such as our health service, education and police systems are the objects of near-permanent revolution’. For Hutton, ‘[t]he story of the past six decades is in many ways the story of how we threw off our shackles only to discover that we do need some constraints’; and [t]he debate in the years ahead will not be about how to continue with our baby boomer liberalism, but over how and where we need restraint around some shared principles and rules’.

Hutton contrasts this new world of freedom and uncertainty with the rigidity and routine of the era prior to the Boomers. From there, he presents the recent period as one of intense disorientation and dizzying change, which has ‘neither a monetary nor religious anchor’. This free-floating uncertainty is not the result of a conscious plan by the Baby Boomer generation, but rather the outcome of a thoughtless nihilism: ‘We

pulled down one culture with its rules and imagined that another would spontaneously take its place'. From there, Hutton poses the stark question: 'How could we have been so destructive?'

Hutton's attempt to answer his own *cri de coeur* is worth reviewing in some detail, as it provides a more thoughtful account of some of the familiar features of the cultural script. He first questions attempts to romanticise the stability of the pre-Boomer era, as 'the Britain of the late 50s and early 60s was a model for nothing you would want to fight for' – racist, and 'suffocatingly dull'. 'We all knew there had to be more than our parents' worthy but unexciting lives, and we knew it simultaneously across the west', he writes. But the 1970s 'was the crisis decade – when the social impact of the 1960s' movements and the disintegrating structures of managed capitalism fused into stagflation and outright social conflict'. 'Looking back', writes Hutton, 'you can see how 1968 led to the futile confusion of the 1970s, the certainties of Thatcherism and the great mindless credit-induced boom of the 1990s and 2000s – credit rolling out of the great deregulated banks and building societies':

There were no financial anchors. The left was impaled on the horns of an impossible cultural dilemma. Naturally it sided with hippies and rock'n'roll and a cultural milieu that kicked against rules. (Hutton 2010, *Observer*)

Here Hutton, like Millar (2010b, *Guardian*), links the Baby Boomer generation to a wider political shift. This, as Hutton notes, is particularly striking in Britain following the defeat of the miners' strike in the 1980s. Indeed, Britain's New Labour represented a self-conscious orientation to move 'beyond left and right' (Furedi 2005; Giddens 1994) towards a new politics of the 'Third Way' (Giddens 1999), heavily influenced by the political model of 'Clintonism' in the USA.

However, as the academic literature suggests, the orientation of some members of the Baby Boomer generation around a political outlook that distanced itself both from left and right is notable even from the 1960s, when the older Baby Boomers came of age. This was apparent in the prominence of the 'New Left', the widespread reaction against the repression that came to characterise the Soviet Union, and the extent to which some ambitious, idealistic Baby Boomers were attracted to the idea of effecting

change through cultural institutions rather than to the formal political arena. In Chapter 6, I examine the relationship between these political trends and the actions and ideas of the generation unit associated with Boomer politics, in an attempt, again following Mannheim, to understand the relationship between generation and wider social forces in shaping these developments.

Moving back to Hutton's argument, the outcome of this combination of economic and social liberalisation 'was much more tolerance and much more wealth – with a disproportionate amount accruing to baby boomers'. 'We baby boomers have had it lucky, certainly, but the hard questions we asked still remain,' he concludes:

We have been bought off with rising equity in our homes and liberties we once could only dream of. But we wanted a different economic and social order – to live with each other in mutual respect and to be governed by those genuinely responsive to our needs and hopes. (Hutton 2010, *Observer*)

The way in which a positive orientation towards a 'different economic and social order', expressed during much of the discussion of the Baby Boomers in the 1990s, has continually been tempered with a fear about its consequences is explored in Chapter 6.

### **4.3 Dispossession, infantilisation, and experimentation**

The major question raised by the motif of the Baby Boomers' destructiveness is whether the project of creating 'a different economic and social order' was itself flawed, by seeking to achieve freedoms that have ushered in the uncertainties of the present day. This question relates to a number of themes that run through the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem. The first is that of *dispossession*: that the Baby Boomers, through a combination of their size and their generational self-confidence, have stripped younger generations of any space through which they can find their own identity and sense of place. This issue emerges most strikingly in relation to the cultural anxiety about 'Generation X' in the 1990s and, in more recent years, the struggles undergone by the 'Millennial' generation: neither of which discussion, unfortunately, there is scope to explore in this thesis.

The second is *infantilisation*: the notion that the Baby Boomers' 'monopolisation' of material resources such as jobs and housing, combined with their alleged psychological tendency to dominate their children's ideas and aspirations, is creating a dynamic that holding young people back from being able to achieve adult goals, such as a stable job, house, and family. This theme is particularly strongly articulated through Howker and Malik's discussion of a 'jilted generation', but also appears in discussions about the Baby Boomers' parenting style, alternately criticised for being overly self-absorbed and for being over-protective of their children (see Bristow, in Lee *et al.* 2014).

The third is *experimentation*, which relates to a deeper crisis of knowledge lurking at the heart of the Baby Boomer problem. Following Mannheim (1952), the problem of generations is best understood as, at base, a problem of the transmission of society's cultural heritage from the past through the present and into the future. The inextricable linkage of the Baby Boomers to the cultural turn of the Sixties means that the Boomers represent, in much of the current discourse, the counter-cultural desire to tear up traditional rules and norms in order to experiment with new ways of doing things. Fifty years on, as Hutton's (2010) *Observer* essay indicates so clearly, there exists no small amount of disquiet about whether this experimentation was, in fact, reckless and destructive. In this regard, the Baby Boomer discourse expresses both a concern about the consequences of the Sixties' assault on tradition, and a concern about the quest implied in that assault, for seeking out new knowledge and experimenting with the social order.

These themes, of dispossession, infantilisation, and experimentation, relate to wider sentiments of existential anxiety and a perceived crisis of knowledge. What is ultimately at stake, argue Howker and Malik in *Jilted Generation*, is 'the mechanism by which our society considers the past and future – our relationship with time'. They continue:

We believe that this relationship is dysfunctional, not because of 'the boomers' or because of the inherent nature of 'capitalism' but because of a way of thinking that has grown to dominate our public discourse and our conception of ourselves. (Howker and Malik 2010a, p. 14)

In the following chapters, I explore in more depth the way that the narrative of ‘Boomer blaming’ – to which, ironically, Howker and Malik have made a significant contribution – both expresses and exacerbates this sense of a schism between past and future.

#### **4.4 Contesting the cultural script**

Taken altogether, the articles in the 2010-11 dataset provides a portrait of the Baby Boomer generation as lucky, affluent, large, selfish, and reckless; and there is an extraordinary degree of consensus about these attributes from commentators across the political and generational spectrum. The fact that 2010 was the year in which a number of polemical books were published about the Baby Boomer problem, including by high-profile government minister and by two young writers who were already established as journalists, meant that there was both a large amount of commentary *specifically* about the Baby Boomers, and that the commentary had a particularly negative emphasis. However, as indicated in Chapter 3, the number of articles about the Baby Boomers has been growing year on year, and there were roughly the same number published in 2008-9 as in 2010-11. Furthermore, analysis of these articles indicates that the construction of the Baby Boomer problem has been taking place over a number of years; thus, the books published in 2010 are better viewed as an attempt to synthesise a problem that has *already* been constructed and articulated.

In this vein, it is worth noting that David Willetts’s famous speech to the conservative think tank Policy Exchange, titled ‘Clash of generations’, took place on 28 November 2005. Here, Willetts employed the character of Cesar Subeyran, the protagonist of Marcel Pagnol’s classic novels *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*, and the publication of a major report by the Pensions Commission (the ‘Turner Report’) to make an impassioned argument about the problem of ‘fairness across the generations’:

We used to think in Britain of a society divided by class. ‘Increasingly we worry about a society divided by conflicts of culture and identity. But I believe there is another division, even more significant but much less remarked upon.

We are also living in a society increasingly divided by age. Are we really ensuring that the younger generation have the wealth and opportunities we have had? Or are we Soubeyrans who, despite our desire to help our own, are really blocking the fountains of future prosperity for them? It is this question of fairness across the generations that I want to focus on today. It is the moral and political question that lies behind the forthcoming Turner Report, and much more political debate besides. (Willetts 2005, *Financial Times*)

Prior to that, since the early 1990s Howe and Strauss (1992, 1993) had been warning about ‘the new generation gap’ between the Baby Boomers and the ‘13<sup>th</sup> Generation’, or Generation X, which featured ‘a smoldering mutual disdain between Americans now reaching midlife and those born just after them’ (Howe and Strauss 1992). Chapter 5 discusses some of the claims made by advocacy organisations during this period about ageing and intergenerational equity, and how these feed into the construction of the Boomers as a problem.

Yet in the wider cultural script, it is only since 2006 that interest in the Baby Boomer *phenomenon* in Britain seems to have hardened into the self-conscious articulation of the Baby Boomer *problem*. While many of the cultural motifs associated with the ‘Peter Pan generation’ (Turner 1986a, *Times*) that appear in the cultural script of 2010-11 emerge and develop in earlier datasets, at some times they appear in a more positive light than at others. The transposition of a set of attributes from ‘good’ to ‘bad’ is indicated in Table 2, below. I suggest that the contemporary discourse of the Baby Boomer manages seamlessly to transpose attributes associated with this generation into a mirror image more suited to a downbeat cultural mood. In this regard, when we, in Britain today, read of ‘fun’ in relation to the Baby Boomers, we are already culturally conditioned to think ‘irresponsible’; when we read of the Baby Boomers as being ‘selfish’, we are automatically equate this moral failing with individualism: a term that, historically, has had a somewhat more positive purchase. Yet when we look at the discussion of the Boomers in the British media in the 1980s or (particularly) the 1990s, it tends to present the attributes associated with the Boomers in a much less negative light.

**Table 2: What makes the Boomers happy also makes them bad**

Happy Boomers	Bad Boomers
Fun	Irresponsible
Idealistic	Naïve
Hedonistic	Unhealthy
Affluent	Wasteful
Ambitious	Greedy
Self-actualised	Self-obsessed
Youthful	Infantile
Individualistic	Selfish
Leisure-loving	Lazy

Part of the reason for the differential approach to the attributes of the Baby Boomers lies in a shift in cultural attitudes and expectations over time. These are not universally held, however; and the more one-sided becomes the articulation of the Baby Boomer problem, the more this prompts some to question the claims that are made.

Thus, despite the overwhelming sentiment today that the Baby Boomer generation constitutes a social problem, the recent datasets of media articles does contain some critical voices. The most forthright is Janet Street-Porter, writing in the *Daily Mail*. ‘I’m beginning to feel paranoid,’ she writes. ‘This year started with another attack on my generation – the baby boomers. The people born after the end of the last war up to the middle of the 1950s now form the largest chunk of the electorate – and as we become pensioners, we’re being blamed for everything that’s wrong in our society’. She begins by noting the publication of Willetts’s ‘nasty’ book *The Pinch*, followed by Beckett’s *What Did The Baby Boomers Ever Do For Us?:* ‘Neither of these were best-sellers (not surprising, as boomers buy the most books!), but they kicked off a growing campaign which blames hard-working, highly motivated, home-owning baby boomers for our current social and economic malaise’ (Street-Porter 2011, *Daily Mail*).



Street-Porter draws attention to the irony that: ‘A lot of this carping is aired in *The Guardian* – odd, as most their readers are over 55, over-educated, home-owning baby boomers, who were student activists in the 1960s. Moaning about boomers might be like shooting yourself in the foot.’ (She does not acknowledge that the *Daily Mail* too has housed some vociferous essays about the problem of the Baby Boomers, for example those written by Sandbrook (2010, 2011).) Street-Porter contrasts the anti-Boomer sentiment in Britain with an apparently favourable sentiment elsewhere – ‘In Sweden, they call my generation the Mappies, which stands for mature, affluent, pioneering people – a much more positive approach to ageing’ – and appeals to sympathy for the ‘huge number of have-nots’ within the Baby Boomer generation:

One in five of us will have to work till we’re 70 to achieve any financial stability. One in five have mortgages averaging more than £50,000. A quarter of us have saved less than £2,000 and a whopping 40 per cent haven’t saved anything. Hardly the rich senior citizens *The Guardian* seems so obsessed with trashing! (Street-Porter 2011, *Daily Mail*).

Street-Porter’s substantive point about the problem of ‘demonising boomers’ is that ‘lumping this generation into one social group and blaming us for the fact the young haven’t got jobs, are poorly educated and can’t afford anywhere to live, is an over-simplification’. In this respect, her argument is similar to that posed by the *Guardian*’s Madeleine Bunting in 2010, that ‘this generational slanging match is the wrong political argument to be having’.

For Bunting, the social problem that people should be engaged with is the monopolisation of wealth and opportunity by the middle classes, rather than the Baby Boomers. ‘[D]rawing the battlefront along generation lines misses the argument we really need to have: about how the desperate shortfall of affordable homes and rising youth unemployment is the legacy of a generation of growing inequality, and how entrenched economically that has now become,’ she writes, and ‘[t]he real scandal is how a couple of decades of rising inequality trap people into postcodes – they can’t move into property hotspots – and into employment patterns broadly similar to their parents’. Nonetheless, the Boomers remain in the frame:

Prosperous baby boomers have not only done well for themselves out of a ludicrous housing market but they have tied up the future so that their kids will also do well. They've bought the buy-to-let properties to provide a nest egg for their offspring; they can support their kids through the volunteering and internships which secure the best jobs. (Bunting 2010, *Guardian*)

Jack's commentary, titled 'We baby boomers blame ourselves for this mess, but is it that simple?' attempts to complicate the Baby Boomer problem through attributing equal blame to others. 'Obeying [Linda] Grant's injunction<sup>8</sup> to take "a long, hard look at ourselves", I can't see that people born later – pick any year from the 1960s to the 1990s – are behaving any better than we did,' he writes:

They may be more aware that the earth's resources aren't infinitely exploitable, that burning carbon has consequences and that cheap labour provides many of our comforts, but none of these seems to have decreased an unthinking devotion to pleasure, consumption and debt that startles those of us who carry memories of ration cards and mum's Co-op dividend number. (Jack 2011, *Guardian*)

However, Jack makes a prescient point about the wider cultural significance of the Baby Boomer discourse, to which we return below. 'It's almost as though they know that a way of life is ending, as indeed it is,' he writes. 'The west is ceding power to the east with an inevitability and speed that Grant's archetypal 1960s anarchists could never have foreseen, or [Geoffrey] Wheatcroft's condemned politicians<sup>9</sup> done much about.' The international comparison chosen by Jack is Delhi, India, 'where recent history is seen differently':

For baby boomers, read the generation defined by Salman Rushdie as *Midnight's Children*, the first to be born in independent India. They have their critics, too: some would say the influential among them accepted socialist ideas too readily, and imprisoned India for too long as a low-growth economy only

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<sup>8</sup> Rustin, S. (2011) 'A life in writing: Linda Grant: It's time for us to take a long, hard look at ourselves. I think the jury is out on my generation.' *Guardian*, 15 January.

<sup>9</sup> Wheatcroft, G. (2010) 'My generation squandered our golden opportunity.' *Guardian*, 28 December.

theoretically committed to greater social equality. All that has gone. There are some unattractive results, aesthetically and morally, in the shape of shopping malls, increasing corruption and dizzying disparities in wealth. But the middle class goes on swelling... Its cities have the vibrancy and optimism of Victorian Britain, as well as that age's darker side. (Jack 2011, *Guardian*)

In this regard, the cultural script of the Baby Boomer could be read as an allegory for the wider process of modernisation and liberalisation, with the Baby Boomer problem now representing the end of that era and an adjustment to the demands of austerity and social control. This point is hinted at by Millar's review of *The Pinch*, where she points to an inherent problem in Willetts's attempt to use the focus on intergenerational inequality to "nudge" a new social contract between citizens that will spill over into a willingness to care collectively for future generations':

He envisages a world where there is more trust between citizens and generations, but the resentment that results from seeing some people achieve and acquire at the expense of others is surely integral to lack of trust in both vertical and horizontal generational relationships. (Millar 2010a, *Guardian*)

The contradiction that Millar hints at here, between an attempt to induce stronger intergenerational bonds by escalating notions of intergenerational conflict, is explored in Chapter 5, through a brief discussion on the history of claimsmaking around intergenerational equity and justice. Explicit challenges to claims that the Baby Boomers constitute a social problem in the present day are relatively weak. However, going back over 26 years we see a more subtle pattern, where tentative suggestions that the Baby Boomer generation might be a social problem in Britain coexist with implicit challenges to this assumption.

#### **4.5 Conclusion: Generation wars, and the 'Boomer party'**

Introducing *The Pinch*, Willetts (2010) writes:

We all know the story. The parents return home from a night away to find a teenage party has got out of hand and the house has been trashed. Every few

months a particularly dramatic episode gets into the media – with distraught parents tidying up a mess left by a swarm of young people summoned on Facebook. It plays to a deep-seated fear that younger people will not appreciate and protect what has been achieved by the older generation. This is the eternal anxiety of each generation about what comes after. But what if, when it comes to many of the big things that matter for our futures, it is the other way round? What if it's actually the older generation, the baby boomers, who have been throwing the party and leaving behind a mess for the next generation to sort out? (Willetts 2010, p. xv)

This metaphor, of the Baby Boomers having thrown a 'party' and expecting their children to clear up the 'mess', continually recurs in the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem, as a shorthand way of expressing a variety of related ideas. Of these, two themes stand out. First is the claim that we are witnessing, in 2010, a reversal of the normal pattern of generational continuity and conflict, in which the older generation worries about the extent to which their successors will appreciate and conserve society's gains and achievements. In Willetts's argument, things today appear to be 'the other way round', where it is the older generation that has 'trashed' the metaphorical house, and the younger generation is left with the task of restoring order to chaos. Here, the Baby Boomer discourse, which is often cast as a discussion about the problem of an ageing cohort, reveals itself to be equally a discourse about the problem of youth: or to be more precise, the hubris of the middle-aged Baby Boomers paying the price for the recklessness of their younger years.

Sandbrook directly echoes Willetts's claim: 'As everyone who has ever thrown a party knows, there comes a point when somebody has to clear up'. 'The truth is the baby-boomers' party went on too long,' he continues. 'They ignored the warnings of their parents and were enjoying themselves so much they could barely hear the cries of their children' (Sandbrook 2010, *Daily Mail*). One year later, he returns to the theme: 'as the environmental costs of reckless growth become increasingly apparent, so the rest of us are confronted with the bill for a party that lasted half a century' (Sandbrook 2011, *Daily Mail*).

Sandbrook's use of the phrase 'the rest of us' in this context is worthy of note. He is self-consciously younger than the Baby Boomers, noting, in his first book on the history of the Sixties, that he is 'probably the first historian to write about the period whose memories only just encompass the years before Thatcherism' (Sandbrook 2005, p. xx). In claiming that 'the rest of us' will pay the bill for the Baby Boomers' party, Sandbrook employs the 'us and them' rhetoric that underpins the discourse of generational conflict. Here, however, Sandbrook positions the Baby Boomers as a generation against all other generations – 'the rest of us' – and the 'party' as lasting 'half a century'.

It should be noted that the positioning of younger generations as the 'cleanup brigade' for a 'party' held by previous generations has been a feature of the cultural script at least since 1993, when it was used by the US writers Neil Howe and William Strauss in their book *13<sup>th</sup> Gen: Abort, retry, ignore, fail?* Howe and Strauss (1993) seek to define the characteristics of the US cohort born between 1961 and 1982, the generation that follows the Baby Boomers (and is more commonly known in today's discourse as 'Generation X'). They develop the character of 'Particle Man' as a way of presenting what they perceive to be the essential characteristics of this 'atomized, dispersed, kinetic generation'. 'Others have had their little binge, their little drug-debt-and-divorce debacle, their little overconsumption party,' they write. 'Now it's time for history's great clean-up brigade. That's not a pretty job, but somebody's got to do it. If not Particle Man, who?' (Howe and Strauss 1993, p. 32)

The rhetoric here bears striking similarity to an article written by *Times* journalist Sarah Vine 17 years later. Vine positions herself within the generation that followed the Baby Boomers; a cohort that she labels 'the Saffy generation' after '[t]he dumpy, dreary, respectable, bespectacled daughter of Edina' in the cult British TV comedy series *Absolutely Fabulous*. Now, writes Vine, 'the Saffys' time has finally come':

Those solemn, nerdy children who had to fix their own lunchboxes and turn up to their own parents' evenings are now occupying top jobs in the media, politics and the arts. Adults from a young age more by necessity than

inclination, they now face an unenviable but inevitable task: cleaning up after the boomers. (Vine 2010, *Times*)

Vine, like Strauss and Howe, presents the benighted 'Generation X' as bearing the brunt of this historical 'cleaning-up' job. However, Generation X is no longer considered to be the only (or even primary) victim of the Boomer story. For Howker and Malik, the 'jilted generation' is the one that follows Generation X: 'the children of the baby boomers, the so-called "boomer echo"' – a demographic 'lump' that 'begins in 1979 and continues until 1994' (Howker and Malik 2010a, pp. 5-6). Sandbrook's assertion that it is 'the rest of us' who will pay the bill for the Baby Boomers' 50-year party takes this argument to its logical conclusion: the price of the Baby Boomers' party, it is implied, will be paid by generations to come, projecting the notion of generational conflict into the future.

The second dominant theme in the use of the 'party' metaphor is the sentiment that the period following the Second World War up until the near present day, where the retirement of the oldest Baby Boomers coincided with what appears to be the most severe global economic crisis since the 1930s, constitutes an historical anomaly or 'blip'; that this period of mass affluence and personal freedom must necessarily come to an end and should not be expected to return. Here, a version of the debate about the meaning of the Sixties that has run on since the end of that era appears to be played out in the discussion of the Baby Boomer problem. What is distinctive about this discussion is the extent to which the affluence and freedom associated with the Sixties appears to be 'stretched', to encompass the entire second half the twentieth century. In this regard, the 'party' metaphor represents a particular understanding of recent history, which itself relates to the problem of knowledge central to the sociology of generations.

Broadly speaking, the idea of the Sixties as a 'party' refers to the optimism, extravagance, vulgarity, high consumption, popular music, and the sudden relaxation in social mores associated with that time. The association of the Sixties with a 'party' is not novel to the current period; nor is the idea that it left a 'mess' to be cleared up. For example, the journalist Christopher Booker's (1980) collection of essays *The Seventies: Portrait of a Decade*, was published a decade after *The Neophiliacs* (1969),

his book about the Sixties. Booker provides a neat summary of the way the optimism of the Sixties was followed by the reaction in the pessimistic Seventies. Arguing that '[t]wo unfolding barometers of cultural optimism' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were 'the height of buildings and the height of girls' hem-lines', Booker writes:

In times of high excitement, like the Twenties and the Sixties, when people looked forward to the future with hope, the skyscrapers and the skirts went up. At time when men became fearful of the future, or began to look back nostalgically to the past, as in the early Thirties, the late Forties and the Seventies, they stopped building towers and the skirts came down again. Never, however, did skirts rise so high, nor was there such a universal frenzy for building tower blocks as in the Sixties: and never, in either case, was the reaction so complete as it has been in the Seventies. (Booker 1980, p. 6)

'Perhaps the most obvious and immediate way to get the Seventies into perspective is to see the extent to which they were a kind of prolonged "morning after" to the euphoria and excesses of the Sixties,' writes Booker (p. 7). Philip Jenkins's (2006) analysis of the cultural mood of 1980s America, which he describes as the 'Decade of Nightmares', makes a similar observation about the shift from optimism to pessimism that took place within the Seventies. From the quest for 'personal and social liberation', the pacifism and 'esoteric spirituality' associated with the Sixties, Jenkins suggests that the mid-1970s onwards brought about a 'marked change in the national mood', 'bringing with it a much deeper pessimism about the state of America and its future, and a growing rejection of liberal orthodoxies' (Jenkins 2006, pp. 3-4).

The view of the Sixties as a 'party', inspired by economic boom and a relaxation of the rules surrounding personal and social behaviour, which was followed by a 'hangover' in which society appeared to regret its excesses, is therefore not unique to the present day. Nor is the way that references to the Sixties are coloured as much by the preoccupations of subsequent eras as they are by the actual events of that time. 'For some [the Sixties] is a golden age, for others a time when the old secure framework of morality, authority and discipline disintegrated,' writes Marwick in the introduction to his history of the period. 'What happened between the late Fifties and

the early Seventies has been subject to political polemic, nostalgic mythologising and downright misrepresentation' (Marwick 1999, p. 3).

The reaction to the Sixties that characterised the period known as the Seventies in many respects prefigures the discussion of the Sixties that is currently taking place through the problem of the Baby Boomer. This can be understood as a form of 'crisis thinking', in which the pressures of the present inform a reaction against the perceived excesses of the recent past. Such crisis thinking is particularly apparent where the Baby Boomers are linked to a discussion of the current economic crisis; this point is elaborated in Chapter 5. But it informs a more general re-appraisal of the Sixties, and the generation seen most to personify that era.

The 26-year media analysis that forms the basis of this thesis indicates that there are broadly two ways in which the 'party metaphor' is expressed in 2010-11. The first is with a sense of nostalgia, where the Sixties is posited as a time of unparalleled fun and optimism. This nostalgia reflects what we describe as a 'narrative of loss', in which even a critique of the optimism and excess of the Sixties is often informed by a certain wistfulness, a subdued craving for excitement in the more sober reality of the latter half of the twentieth century. Thus Vine writes, about her 'Saffy' generation':

All fortysomething, all hard grafters, all Doing the Right Thing. Eco-friendly cars, complicated recycling routines, carbon offsetting, responsible alcohol consumption, organic home-grown vegetables, restrained sartorial taste, nothing flash, brash or showy. All apologetically aware of their good fortune in life, all with highly developed social consciences, all dutiful taxpayers.

Such a contrast to the generation that came before, with their big ideas, their insatiable appetites and their blithe disregard for the rest of the world. That brilliant, golden baby boomer generation: heroically hedonistic and with the dial forever stuck at 11. (Vine 2010, *Times*)

However, the longstanding presentation of the Sixties as the party that younger generations had their misfortune to miss has hardened into a narrative, becoming dominant in the more recent period, about the destructive consequences of the Sixties



party, which must now be 'cleaned up' by younger generations. This narrative *personifies* the enduring debate about the Sixties in generational terms, presenting the Baby Boomers as the 'villains' responsible for throwing the party, and younger generations as the 'victims' charged with the unenviable task of cleaning up 'the mess'. As noted above, it also has the rhetorical effect of 'stretching' the experience of the Sixties and the post-war boom to encompass the second half of the twentieth century.

These two elements, of historical stretching and personification, raise important questions for the sociological study of generations. The first is to do with society's knowledge of, and relation to, recent history. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the social problems that are today attributed to the Baby Boomer generation often ignore important anomalies both in actual historical events, and in their interpretation over time. The second is to do with the fostering of conflict between generations. In previous eras, one goal of social policy was to understand 'the conflict of generations' (Feuer 1969) in order to ameliorate it, based on the recognition that intergenerational strife was ultimately destructive. Today, the impression is of an active attempt by some policymakers and opinion-formers to incite a 'war between the generations' (Kaletsky 2010, *Times*).

## **Chapter 5 The Baby Boomers as an economic problem**

### **5.1 Introduction**

My analysis indicates that the Baby Boomer generation has become constructed as a problem in two main ways: as an economic problem, and as a cultural problem. In this and the next chapter, I describe the way that each of these problems appears and emerges. I do this, first, by reviewing some of relevant literature, which grounds my analysis in the context in which the problem emerges. I then discuss a selection of articles from the 1986-2011 dataset that best encapsulate the overarching themes.

The key finding presented in this chapter is that the economic circumstances of the Baby Boomers, and the role ascribed to this generation in causing the current economic crisis, undergoes a substantially different presentation over time; and that while the Boomers have been linked to economic *issues* since 1986 (and indeed, since their birth in the postwar economic boom), it is only in the period since about 2006 that the narrative hardens into the idea that the Boomers constitute an economic *problem*. The linking of the Baby Boomers to economic problems (and solutions) is most clearly expressed in three discussions:

- **The Boomers as a sizeable and powerful consumer group.** Since its birth, this cohort has been regarded as a significant target for marketers. This directly reflects the US discussion, and borrows from there the ‘wide’ definition of the cohort as those born between 1946 and 1964, which reflects both the demographic character of the US birth cohorts and the more expansive character of the postwar economic boom. While the present-day cultural script tends to present the consumption habits of the Boomers as a problem, the spending power associated with this cohort has previously been presented as an opportunity for, and sign of, economic dynamism. The large body of literature on consumption, and its actual relationship to economic growth, is outside the scope of this thesis; for our purposes, it is important merely to note the contradiction between inciting the Boomers to consume, and then castigating them for doing so.

- **Living standards and personal wealth transfer.** A significant feature of the present-day cultural script is the way that it has linked the Baby Boomers' (relatively) high living standards and use of personal debt with the economic problems resulting from a reliance on national debt. An often-heard refrain is that the generation coming of age today will have a lower standard of living than its parents. Yet the dataset from the 1980s contains some articles claiming that the Baby Boomers' living standards are actually lower than those enjoyed by *their* parents; and more recent datasets contain reports about the extent to which the Boomers are using their personal (relative) wealth to fund their own retirement, as well as supporting both their parents and their grown-up children financially. This finding complicates the widespread notion that the Boomers have always, and uniformly, been seen to be marked out by their affluence and self-interest. It also illuminates the extent to which what seems to be a critique of the Baby Boomers as a *specific* generation can, in fact, represent the mobilisation of age-old envy by the young against older generations *in general*.
- **Pensions, health and social care: the 'paradox of longevity'.** The 'pensions crisis', and the related problems experienced by the welfare state in addressing the needs of an ageing population, are the most obviously 'concrete' manifestation of the Baby Boomer problem. This thesis does not dispute that western societies are experiencing some very real problems to do with the 'affordability' of the postwar welfare state in the twenty-first century, and that significant rises in life expectancy have contributed to the tension surrounding pensions and retirement. Indeed, as Mullan (2000) notes in his critique of the notion of the 'pensions time bomb', 'mainstream questioning of the "affordability" of the welfare state' began in the mid-1970s (p. 145). However, it is suggested that warnings about the dire economic consequences to be caused by a 'silver tsunami' (Bone 2007, *Times*) of retiring Boomers simplifies a more complex reality, which has more to do with political and economic strategy than demographic trends (Walker 1996, Walker and Naegele 1999).

The emergence of these themes is analysed in more detail in Section 5.3. Section 5.4 focuses on the concept of 'Boomergeddon', which emerged in 2006, as an illustration

of how the presentation of the Baby Boomers as an economic problem synthesises the above themes through a wider cultural critique. Before this, however, I focus on one key contextual factor that explains how the Baby Boomers became constructed as an economic problem. This is the growing preoccupation, across the political spectrum, with the problems seen to arise from an ageing population, which in turn stem from the rise of what Furedi (1997) has termed ‘demographic consciousness’.

## 5.2 Demographic consciousness, and ‘intergenerational equity’

As previously noted, demography has always played a significant role in the sociology of generations. Mannheim’s seminal essay on the problem of generations aimed to provide a more dynamic account of history than that allowed by the ‘positivism’ promoted by some key sociological thinkers of his time. However, demographic interest in, and influence on, generations remained strong, as indicated by the impact of work by Davis (1940), Ryder (1965), and Samuel H. Preston (1984); and as a demographic consciousness came to pervade wider social thinking, it affected the shape taken by discussions about the problem of generations in the later twentieth, and early twenty-first, century.

As suggested in the previous chapter, certain features of the present-day cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem appear to promote a Malthusian sensibility of natural and economic limits, where ‘the Western economy is beginning to buckle under the pressure for natural resources’ (Sandbrook 2010, *Daily Mail*). This concern with absolute population size reflects a wider endorsement of the notion that there are ‘limits to growth’ (Randers *et al.* 1972, Meadows *et al.* 2004) brought about by a combination of population growth and natural resource consumption. The environmental discourse that runs alongside an acceptance of the ‘limits to growth’ thesis has, since the 1970s, been linked with the construction of the Baby Boomer problem, in particular as it pertains to a narrative of ‘over-consumption’ and attitudes towards modernisation and economic development (Booker 1980, Marwick 1999).

However, the sociology of generations is arguably focused less on *absolute* population size than it is on *relative* cohort size: and this has great relevance for the development of claimsmaking about the Baby Boomers as an economic problem. The

concept that best encapsulates this focus on relative generation size is ‘intergenerational equity’. Marshall *et al.* (1993) explain that the issue of intergenerational equity emerged in the USA in 1984, and credit this development to two events that ‘occurred independently of each other, causing ripple effects that catapulted the issue of intergenerational equity to visibility in both the policy community and the academic community’ (p.138). These were the publication, in the journal *Demography*, of Samuel H. Preston’s (1984) Presidential Address to the Population Association of America, discussed below; and the formation of the organisation Americans for Generational Equity (AGE), discussed in section 5.2.2.

In ‘Children and the Elderly: Divergent Paths for America’s Dependents’, Preston (1984) articulates a theory that is self-consciously at odds with a Malthusian understanding of the impact of demographic change. Preston describes the impact of ‘several decades of abrupt demographic change’ in the USA, brought about by a dramatic rise in the fertility rate (the Baby Boom) and – importantly – ‘a very rapid decline in old age mortality’. The result, he argues, is too ‘unanticipated’ developments: ‘The child population has declined and the elderly population has spurted’ (Preston 1984, p. 435). ‘Most demographers’, he writes, ‘would probably expect such rapid change in age structure to have favourable consequences for children and troubling ones for the elderly’:

Fewer children should mean less competition for resources in the home as well as greater availability of social services earmarked for children, especially public schooling. The sharp rise in the number of elderly persons should put enormous pressure on resources directed towards the older ages, such as medical care facilities, nursing homes, and social security funds. At least this view would be characteristic of those who see the world through a Malthusian lens and find the main social drama to be the pressure of numbers on some kind of inelastic resource. (Preston 1984, pp. 435-6)

It is worth noting that the outlook that Preston is describing neatly summarises the kind of concerns aired 20 years previously by Ryder (1965), in his influential article ‘The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change’. In this article, Ryder painted a bleak reality for the Baby Boomers:

In the United States today the cohorts entering adulthood are much larger than their predecessors. In consequence, they were raised in crowded housing, crammed together in schools, and are now threatening to be a glut on the labor market. Perhaps they will have to delay marriage, because of too few jobs or homes, and have fewer children. (Ryder 1965, p. 845)

Preston's thesis, however, is that:

[E]xactly the opposite trends have occurred in the relative well-being of our two groups of age dependents and that demographic factors have not only failed to prevent this outcome but, in many ways, encouraged it. Conditions have deteriorated for children and improved dramatically for the elderly and demographic change has been intimately involved in these developments. (Preston 1984, p. 436)

While Preston's thesis departs from the determinism of Malthusian demography in terms of an emphasis on absolute numbers, it nonetheless speaks to the power of demographic consciousness in debates about economic development in the late twentieth century. Furedi (1997) notes the apparently contradictory trend of 'competitive fertility', whereby commentators' concern with 'the "population explosion" in Africa' co-exists with an anxiety about falling birthrates in the West. The prevalence of this 'differential attitude', writes Furedi, suggests that 'what is at stake here is not a neutral discussion about numbers in the abstract. Statements about numbers are often driven by another agenda, which is not readily apparent' (Furedi 1997, pp. 12-13).

This insight, that demographic concerns are often informed by another agenda, is important in understanding the growing consensus that 'intergenerational equity' is a key issue for the twenty-first century. It is confirmed by Alan Walker, Professor of Social Policy at the University of Sheffield and an influential academic voice on ageing in Britain. Walker's (1996) analysis of the "renegotiation" of the social contract – in particular, as it pertains to public pensions – has, at least in 'Britain and EU countries', 'little or nothing to do with "intergenerational" conflict'. Rather:

It is argued that the primary concern of policy-makers is with the perceived burden of pensions on public expenditure rather than any manifest concern about distributional justice between age cohorts. Thus, for largely ideological reasons, an economic-demographic imperative has been manufactured in some countries, with the aid of international economic agencies, to facilitate the restructuring of their welfare states. In the name of this imperative some countries have set about re-writing the post-war social contract between age cohorts. Rather than being “rooted in life-course processes” (Bengston *et al.* 1991: 225) the “intergenerational equity” debate should be regarded as a socio-political construct. Seen in this light it is not surprising that, during the 1980s, the USA led the way in discussions of “inter-generational equity”. (Walker’s 1996, p. 11)

Two key points here are pertinent to the research in this thesis: first, the diffusion of the ‘ageing problem’ from the USA to Britain, and second, the political dimension of the concept of intergenerational equity. We examine these in turn, below.

### **5.2.1 The diffusion of the ‘ageing problem’**

First, the construction of the Baby Boomers as an economic problem can be understood less as a response to the particular issues confirmed by the size and characteristics of this demographic cohort, than as a wider anxiety about the affordability of the post-war welfare state and the general phenomenon described as ‘ageing’. Over the course of 26 years, we can see that the newspaper articles mentioning the Baby Boomers become linked to reports of new books on the problem of ageing.

One example is the coverage of the 1986 book *Our Aging Society*. This was co-edited by Alan Pifer, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and chair of its Aging Society Project, which was started in 1982 and represented ‘the first of its kind to explore in breadth the social, economic, political, and ethical implications of this major demographic phenomenon that will, over the next half century and beyond, profoundly affect every one of our nation’s institutions and individuals’ (Pifer and

Bronte 1986, p. vii). Pifer delivered a lecture at London's Royal Society of Arts (RSA) in February 1987, and the relevance of *Our Aging Society* to the British situation is highlighted by reports that Pifer 'has an ally in Dr Eric Midwinter, aged 54, of the Centre for Policy on Ageing in London, who has been observing the demographic trends of British society with similar anxiety' (Moorhead 1987, *Times*).

The reception that greeted *Our Aging Society* in Britain illustrates one instance in which how high-profile concerns about ageing diffused from the USA to Britain, and connected with research and claimsmaking that was already taking place. For example, the Centre for Policy on Ageing (CPA) was established by the Nuffield Foundation in 1947 as the National Corporation for the Care of Old People. 'Some thirty-five years later, as the charity developed in strength and knowledge and the parameters of old age altered, we transposed ourselves into a think-tank concerned with the social issues of older age – the Centre for Policy for Ageing,' the CPA (circa 2007) explains. As Mullan (2000) notes, in 1981 the CPA, along with the British Society of Gerontology, began publication of the journal *Ageing and Society*, with Alan Walker and 'Essex University's poverty expert Peter Townsend... at the helm'. The journal's 'first editorial noted the recent emergence of "a greater awareness of the ubiquitous nature of ageing and the value of studying it as a topic in itself"' (Mullan 2000, p. 81).

We can see, then, that there was already an awareness of the 'problem' of ageing by the very early 1980s. This growing demographic consciousness laid the groundwork for the widespread coverage in the UK of books with titles such as *Agequake* (Wallace 1999) and *Grey Dawn* (Peterson 1999), which were focused on the US situation (Benady 1999a, *Daily Mail*; Benady 1999b, *Guardian*; Elliott 1999, *Guardian*). However, what also becomes apparent when we consider the early acceptance of the ageing problem is that this concern is not, initially, focused on the Boomer cohort, for the simple reason that the oldest Boomers were merely 35 years old in 1980. The discussion of intergenerational equity is thus framed as a more general problem of the relationship between young and old, as indicated by Edward A. Wynne's contribution to the Carnegie Corporation book, titled 'Will the Young Support the Old?' (Pifer and Bronte 1986, pp. 243-261). In this regard, it speaks to the fusion of the centuries-old problem, described in Chapter 2, of a younger generation's



resentment of its elders, and the contemporary consciousness of the problem of ageing in general.

That the problem of intergenerational equity is conceived initially more as a tension between those generations that are currently younger and those that are currently older, rather than a tension between Boomers and Millennials, is highlighted by Howe and Strauss (1993), in their book focused on the ‘baby bust’ cohort that followed the Boomers (‘13<sup>th</sup> Gen’, more commonly known elsewhere in the literature as ‘Generation X’):

As they watch so many older people enrich themselves (while blaming younger people for, of all things, being greedy), 13ers sometimes play the blame game themselves. When they do, they look up the age ladder and see one massive, opaque population mass – Boomer yuppies – as the culprits. But Boomers are just one of three over-age-30 layers in today’s constellation of living American generations. And there’s plenty of blame to go round. (Howe and Strauss 1993, p. 35)

Howe and Strauss go on to paint a picture of the ‘G.I. Generation’, born between 1901 and 1924 (Strauss and Howe 1991, p. 261) and ‘numbering 30 million’, as being particularly significant in the monopolisation of resources:

In national politics, G.I.s organized them into A.A.R.P.-style [American Association of Retired People] generational lobbies to promote their own age-bracket agenda. They succeeded in shifting public and private resources, and the very definition of age-based ‘entitlements’, away from the young and toward themselves. They became the best-insured, most leisured, and (in relation to the young) most affluent generation of elders in American history. Before the G.I.s started to hit their 65<sup>th</sup> birthday in the mid-‘60s, the elderly age bracket was the nation’s most poverty-prone; in 1975, this distinction jumped to the (13er) child age bracket, where it has stayed ever since. (Howe and Strauss 1993, pp. 35-36)

The perceived significance of age and cohort size to political power is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, which explores the emergence of the ‘politics of age’. Here, I simply wish to note the way that the prevailing demographic consciousness of the 1980s began to construct *older generations* as a problem. It was only when the Boomers began to retire, thereby becoming the latest older generation, that the cultural script began to harden around the notion that the Boomers specifically constitute an economic problem. This finding implicitly challenges many of the claims reviewed in the previous chapter, which present specific attributes of the Baby Boomer cohort – such as their size, behaviour, or birth location at a particular time in history – as the cause of the current crisis.

### **5.2.2 The politics of intergenerational equity**

The second important point to emerge from Walker’s analysis is a challenge to the assumption that concerns about ‘intergenerational equity’ are the result of intergenerational conflict itself. Rather, he suggests, this concept can be better understood as an idea that has been mobilised by the political elite to provide a rationale for restructuring the welfare state. Again, the concept of diffusion is helpful. Writing in 1996, Walker notes a contrast between the public debate of intergenerational equity in the USA and that in Europe, ‘where it has hardly surfaced’. However he also anticipates the way that this concept would come to frame the understanding of policy problems in the wider western world:

Although the most colourful rhetoric has been American, the issue of intergenerational equity is relevant to all western societies because of the social contract between generations implicit within the welfare state. This social contract is based on intergenerational transfers of resources through the mediums of taxation and expenditure. (Walker 1996, p. 2)

In 2010, 14 years after Walker noted the difference between the political rhetoric used in the USA and Britain, we can see that ‘the issue of intergenerational equity’ has not only surfaced in Britain, but become an important frame for political debate. The current British policy discourse tends to employ the terms ‘inter-generational justice’ (Willett 2010a, p. 260), or ‘fairness for future generations’ (Intergenerational

Foundation 2014a) to denote the concept of intergenerational equity. However, we can see that the concept itself is firmly enmeshed in the present cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem, and has managed to achieve a certain bipartisan appeal in recent years.

The self-conscious attempt to present the intergenerational equity debate as one with cross-party appeal is exemplified by an article in our dataset headlined ‘From boom to bust: the silver generation that could leave Uncle Sam broke’. Here, Bone (2007) quotes from Robert Bixby ‘of the non-partisan Concord Coalition, who has made dozens of joint appearances with analysts from the Left and Right on a “Fiscal Wake-Up Tour” across America over the last two years’:

‘It doesn’t matter if you’re liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat, the numbers are unsustainable,’ says Bixby. ‘For the sake of our country’s future, and particularly the young people, it’s really important to get this under control.’ (Cited in Bone 2007, *Times*)

This shift towards the politics of generation as something that transcends left and right is noteworthy, as claimsmaking around the notion of intergenerational equity were historically associated with the political right: as indicated by the fact that the lobbying organization Americans for Generational Equity (AGE) was founded by a Republican Senator, David Durenberger, with the aim of ‘restructuring the Social Security system along the lines of a social assistance program’, offering ‘reduced benefits... at later ages only to those who qualify through means tests’ (Marshall *et al.* 1993, p. 120; Quadagno 1990). In Britain, Walker’s statement that ‘the “intergenerational equity” debate should be regarded as a socio-political construct’ speaks to an awareness, in previous eras, that political challenges to the welfare state – cloaked in the language of generational conflict – tended to come from the political right.

Chapter 4 indicated how the assumption of intergenerational inequity and conflict has, in more recent times, gained greater appeal both across the political spectrum, and the generational divide. Here, I merely wish to note the extent to which media analysis of the construction of the Boomers as an economic problem in Britain

appears to support Walker's understanding. I describe below how concerns about pensions and healthcare pre-date both the recent global economic crisis and the retirement of the Baby Boomers, and suggest that certain features of 'Boomer behaviour' that are presented as exemplars of this generation's greed could be understood in other ways: as, for example, being targeted as a consumer market more aggressively than previous generations, or making private provision for their retirement and the support of their children in the awareness that the welfare state can no longer be relied upon.

### **5.2.3 A note on claimsmakers and the social problems process**

The discussion above attempted to indicate the wider socio-political context in which the Baby Boomer generation has been constructed as an economic problem. Within this context, particular individuals and organisations emerge as claimsmakers, formulating and promoting the idea that the Boomers have had, or will have, a negative effect on the economy and society.

Both the academic literature and the media articles analysed in this study indicate that there are a small number of organisations that have mobilised around age. These include the 'grey power' lobby groups in the USA, such as the American Association of Retired People (AARP), founded in 1958 by Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, a retired high school principal (AARP 2014); and the Grey Panthers, established in 1970 by Maggie Kuhn to 'look at the common problems faced by retirees' and to use the 'new kind of freedom' found in their retirement 'to speak personally and passionately about what they believed in, such as their collective opposition to the Vietnam War' (Grey Panthers 2014). In the light of Edmunds and Turner's (2002a) argument that the postwar period, with its focus on generations, has also been significant for the mobilisation of women, it is interesting that the founders of both the AARP and the Grey Panthers were female.

On other side of the age divide, Sara Rix (1999), Senior Policy Advisor at the AARP, notes:

Over the past decade or so, efforts have been made to foster what might be regarded as a “politics of the young”, as witnessed by the creation of several organizations of largely younger persons seeking to draw attention to what they have seen as an excess of resources going to both the baby boomers and older people. (Rix 1999, p. 193)

Examples of such organisations are Americans for Generational Equity (AGE); Lead or Leave, which ‘sought to get politicians to take the lead in dealing with generational issues so that the burden of dealing with older people’s support costs would not fall exclusively on the young’; and Third Millennium, which again sought to ‘cut or reduce benefits to older people to lessen the burden of support on future young generations’ (Rix 1999, p. 193).

In Britain, the relevant organisations tend to promote themselves less as lobby groups than as organisations dedicated to the study of ageing, the general promotion of the interests of older people, or social networks for retired people. In Britain, the most prominent include the Centre for Policy on Ageing, established in 1947; Age Concern England and Help the Aged, which in 2009 merged to become Age UK (Age UK 2014); the University of the Third Age (U3A), established in France in 1972 and in Britain in 1981, by Peter Laslett, a professor at the University of Cambridge, Eric Midwinter, director of the Centre for Policy on Ageing, and Michael Young, of the Consumers’ Association and the Open University (U3A 2014); and Saga, which is a commercial organisation that is primarily known for selling holidays and insurance targeted at older people, but which in recent years has adopted a proactive media strategy with regard to the Baby Boomer discussion.

These organisations have, I contend, played an interesting role in the construction of the Baby Boomer problem, in that their attempts to defend the young-old (through, for example, drawing attention to their relative lack of wealth in retirement) often tends to feed the widespread criticism of this age group. So, for example, Reade (2011) writes in the *Mirror* of his ‘disbelief at reading a SAGA insurance survey, which claims that 61% of over-50s are now complaining about suffering “a lifestyle crash” over the past year’. ‘Apparently, with soaring living costs and low returns on savings they’re having to cut back on “non-essential spending”,

meaning they use the car less and take fewer holidays’, Reade writes. ‘Well boo, bleeding, hoo’. Reade is scornful of Saga trying to draw sympathetic attention to the Boomers:

I’m over 50, have friends my age struggling to get back into work, and know low-paid pensioners and ageing benefit claimants hit by inflation and slashed public services. But if one age group has less right to whine about a ‘lifestyle crash over the last year’ it is the over-50s, most of whom have never had it so good. (Reade 2011)

Hanson (2006), writing in the *Guardian*, interprets ‘another wretched “survey”, this time by Help the Aged, suggesting that two-thirds of the baby boomer generation have not saved for their final years’ as a castigation of her own generation’s profligacy, rather than a call for sympathy. ‘Oh tut-tut. Naughty baby boomers. And how were we expected to do that?’ Hanson argues, noting that ‘when we baby boomers were young, we earned weedy amounts by today’s standards’ and, anyway, ‘[w]e believed in the welfare state. We thought that if we worked hard, our pensions would look after us’. It is also worth noting that one of the most vocal critics of the Baby Boomers is Francis Beckett, who is also Editor of the U3A’s magazine *Third Age Matters* and has developed, with other playwrights, theatre productions aimed specifically at audiences in their ‘third age’ (Third Age Theatre 2014)

The difficulties that lobby groups have experienced in gaining sympathy for the plight of the Boomers makes for a curious observation. The classic social problems process modelled by Best (2008) and described in Chapter 3 is one where campaigns or lobby groups make claims which, for a combination of specific and wider contextual reasons, gain media attention and are taken on board by policymakers. In contrast, claimsmaking around the Baby Boomer problem seems to be led quite explicitly by policymakers, drawing on the work of academics. It does not emerge from lobby groups that already exist – indeed, such lobby groups that do exist appear to be established after the event, apparently to give legitimacy for claims that have already had policy and media influence. So for example the Intergenerational Foundation was established in 2011, *after* the Baby Boomers had already been constructed as a

problem in mainstream policy circles, with an advisory board drawn largely from academia and the media (Intergenerational Foundation 2014b).

A further example of the way that the impetus for the Baby Boomer problem appears to come from an intellectual and policy level rather than from campaign groups gaining attention for their claims is provided by British (Conservative) government minister David Willetts, who has been writing about the problem of a ‘clash of generations’ since at least 2005 (Willetts 2005, 2010a). Willetts has been involved with the Commission on Global Aging for the bipartisan US organisation the Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS), as has the British Labour MP Frank Field. Neil Howe, who, as noted above, is a prolific and influential writer on the generation question within the grey literature, is Senior Associate of the CSIS’s Global Aging Initiative, and co-author of the CSIS’s influential report *The Graying of the Great Powers* (CSIS 2008).

In this small example, we can see the basis for a process of diffusion of the modern problem of generations across partisan and national boundaries, which is developed among policy thinkers and promoted, via the media, to wider society. As such, the overtly ‘top down’ character of claimsmaking around intergenerational equity seems to present an interesting divergence from the classic ‘social problems process’. This is not to say, however, that the role played by claimsmaking organisations is less significant; indeed, following Best (2008), we can see that the resources enjoyed by such groups allows them to have a rapid and disproportionate impact on the construction of the narrative of intergenerational (in)equity. As Rix (1999) notes, despite their ‘inflammatory language’, the US groups ‘seem to have had little success so far in fanning the flames of intergenerational warfare, (AGE and Lead or Leave have become moribund), perhaps because the bogeyman is not so apparent in the faces of parents and grandparents.’ Nonetheless:

[T]he importance of these groups should not be minimized. AGE, for example, may never have become a potent political force, but it has left a legacy, according to Quadango (1990: 640) as a result of its ‘reshaping... the debate... all future policy choices will have to take generational equity into account’.  
(Rix 1999, p. 193)

The remainder of this chapter examines how concerns about intergenerational equity, aired through the British press, have reshaped aspects of the debate about the recent financial crisis into a narrative about the problem of the Baby Boomer generation.

### **5.3 The shaping of the Boomers as an economic problem**

As Chapter 4 indicates, by 2010-11 we can see the articulation of a clear set of claims that the Baby Boomers constitute an economic problem, and indeed, that they are somehow responsible for the global financial crisis that began around 2007 and became more widely apparent the following year. The Baby Boomers' (relatively) generous pension entitlements; the way that they benefited from the 'housing boom' that preceded the financial collapse; their birth location in the post-war boom of the 1950s; the effect of the sheer size of the cohort upon state-funded pensions and healthcare; and the Boomers' allegedly selfish outlook and behaviour are marshalled, in various combinations, to make the claim that it was 'the boomers who busted us' (Sandbrook 2010, *Daily Mail*; Vine 2008, *Times*). However, media analysis of the period 1986-2011 complicates the solidity of this claim.

#### **5.3.1 'Empty nests lined with gold'<sup>10</sup>: The Boomers as consumer group**

One of the most important features of the Baby Boomer generation since its birth has been its significance as a consumer group. As is widely recognised in the literature, the American postwar boom gave rise to the emergence of the teenager: a new consumer group, made up of young people with relatively large amounts of disposable income and a relatively light load of work or family responsibilities (Bernard 1961, Gillis 1974); and the size of this cohort contributed to its attraction to marketers. As the Boomer cohort has aged, its size has remained significant as a consumer group: and in the mid-1980s, the media discussion was very much about how to 'cash in' on the spending power of the Boomers, as they were then reaching middle age – or at least, leaving 'youth' (with the very oldest possible Boomers being aged 41 in 1986, and the youngest being aged 21).

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<sup>10</sup> Matthews (1987, *Guardian*).



The interest in the Boomers as a consumer group in the mid-1980s is usefully summarised by Steve Turner (1986c), in the final article in a three-part series on the Boomers published in the *Times*. Noting that this was ‘the generation whose appearance was heralded in 1959 by Mark Abrams in a book called *The Teenage Consumer*’, Turner cites Gerard O’Neill, of the Henley Centre for Forecasting, as evidence of the persistence of the Boomers’ relatively high levels of disposable income. ‘If you look at the distribution of income, it’s particularly the family-formers between 25 and 45 who’re experiencing a growth in disposable income’, O’Neill says. ‘They’re benefiting from home ownership, from inheritances and from the economic situation generally. They’re a major group in spending power.’ This means, looking towards the future:

‘The middle-aged now will be very wealthy retired people at the beginning of the next century. They’ll have paid off their homes and they’ll have inherited their parents’ homes. They’ll be financially very secure and a major market in terms of spending, much bigger than any previous generation because of the inheritance factor.

‘Even over the next 10 years we’re going to see a drop in the number of teenagers and a great deal of growth in the 25-to-44 age group. This makes them a very important consumer group. If you take it to its conclusion, you’ll be talking very much about “grey power” by the turn of the century.’ (Gerald O’Neill, cited in Turner 1986c)

As indicated in Chapter 4, the present-day cultural script of the Baby Boomer tends to present this generation’s consumption habits as problematic: leading to the depletion of economic and environmental resources (‘overconsumption’), and a ‘squeezing out’ of other generations from the consumer market, encapsulated by Howker and Malik’s phrase, the ‘jilted generation’. Solutions to this perceived problem of over-consumption tend to have a grasping character, as they attempt to claw back resources or entitlements from today’s young-elderly. Twenty-five years ago, the discussion of the Baby Boomers as a consumer group was similarly parasitical, but in a

different direction. The purchasing power of the Boomer generation was presented as a *solution*, of sorts, to the economic problems of the time.

For example, Hamish McRae in 1987 discusses a report by the US study group Conference Board, which ‘argues that the 35 to 50 age group, the baby boom generation, will account for over 70 per cent of the growth in US household population in the next 15 years’. By contrast, ‘the youth market is shrinking’, with the result that: ‘Tie in this demographic shift with the age transfer of wealth, as these people inherit from their parents and you have an extraordinarily powerful market’ (McRae 1987, *Guardian*). ‘When youth turns to middle age, and spending power matches waistlines, admen scent rich pickings,’ writes Kate Muir in 1992:

The new big spenders, the darlings of marketing and advertising departments throughout the country, are the grumpies – grown-up urban mature professionals. The future for any successful company lies in divesting the grumpies of their vast disposable income. (Muir 1992, *Times*)

Victoria Mather (1986 *Times*) notes the turnaround in the fortunes of the music sales industry, as ‘the baby boomers – the first generation accustomed to buying recorded music – are now in their twenties and thirties with high disposable incomes’. The Baby Boomer consumer market is also discussed in relation to such a diverse range of goods as luxury cars (Bremner 1987b, *Times*); sportswear, resulting from ‘the heightened awareness of healthy lifestyles and the sports revolution’ (May 1987, *Guardian*); control tights (Davies 1992, *Daily Mail*); nostalgic toys and environmentally-friendly gifts (Tran 1992, *Guardian*); cruises (Armstrong 1999, *Times*); and medical equipment, as ‘Smith & Nephew pins its hopes on ailing, ageing baby-boomers’ (Walsh 2006, *Guardian*).

Part of the reason for the Baby Boomers’ apparent power as a consumer group is its demographic size. As Os Guinness, author of the 1973 book *A Critique of the Counter Culture*, notes: ‘As baby-boomers grow older, every new age bracket they

reach will assume its importance because it's them and there are so many of them' (cited in Turner 1986c, *Times*). Another aspect, however, is its age. The notion of 'grey' spending power refers to the relatively high levels of disposable income enjoyed by those who have reached middle age and recent retirement in an historical period of relative affluence: that is, the post-war period. In this regard, many of the claims made about the affluence of the Baby Boomers in 2010-11 can be seen as a 'recycling', or updating, of claims that have previously been made about the generation that preceded the Boomers.

An example of this is provided by Virginia Matthews (1987), who explains the shifts in the age structure of the British population as 'a complex mixture of social phenomena – the after-effects of the post-second world war "baby boom," better health care, and therefore increased longevity and, more recently, the trend towards having fewer babies, older'. She goes on to explain the relevance of this for marketers, for whom 'the most intriguing aspect to the growth of the over-45s is the remarkable rise in "grey market" affluence':

Not only are the over 55s reaping the benefits of having two adults at work very often, together with financially independent children and dwindling mortgages. They are also inheriting homes they have no need to live in and can therefore sell – investing and spending the proceeds. A far cry indeed from the young 'just-marrieds' who have all the burdens of mortgages and children ahead of them.

The task for marketers is surely simple then. The obsession with youth – understanding them, creating commercials for them, pleading with them to buy goods – is short-sighted. Ergo, future targeting must be towards the growing over-45 market, making it socially respectable for grandparents to pamper themselves with clothes, cars, kitchen gadgets, and cosmetics, just as it has long been so for their grandchildren. (Matthews 1987, *Guardian*)

Matthews's article clearly seems to be referring an to older cohort than the Baby

Boomers. The oldest Boomer, in 1987, would have been 42; Matthews makes clear that she is talking about the consumer potential of the over-45s and, indeed, over-55s. Yet many of the cultural motifs that she employs about this cohort contain many of the themes that come across in discussions of the Baby Boomer consumer, and through her mention of ‘the after-effects of the post-second world war “baby boom”’, there is an implicit blurring in this article of the lines between the generations. Such rhetorical slippage indicates both the porousness of generational boundaries, and the extent to which ideas that can appear to be attached to specific features of specific demographic groups can in fact spread across different groups, according to the temper of the times.

To put it another way, we should not assume that ideas are generated by demographic realities: often, they can be generated by other social and cultural factors, and then become attached to demographic cohorts. ‘Lumping the young middle-aged in with 65-year-olds might seem a brutal act, but with consumer goods companies only now coming to terms with the growing numbers of, and affluence among, the older generation, this is no time for such sensibilities,’ states Matthews (1987, *Guardian*).

One interesting result of the widespread interest in the Baby Boomers as a consumer group is that the organisation that seems to be the most successful in acting as the ‘voice’ of this generation is Saga Ltd: a company that provides goods and services for the grey market. This partly reflects the profile and expertise of the pensions expert Ros Altmann, who was Saga’s Chief Executive over some of the time periods studied here. It also, however, reflects the way that charities that have traditionally organised around the interests of older people – such as Age Concern England and Help the Aged – have floundered in attempting to find an advocacy strategy appropriate to what is now popularly known as the ‘third age’.

This problem was highlighted by the attempt, by Age Concern England (ACE), to ‘launch a standalone membership brand called Heyday in an attempt to target the 1960s baby boomers and protest generation, who are now mostly in their 50s’ (Lepper 2005). Metz and Underwood’s (2005) book *Older Richer Fitter:*

*Identifying the customer needs of Britain's ageing population*, published by ACE, showed the organisation's desire to relate to the Boomers as a consumer group. In December 2005, *MediaWeek's* Joe Lepper reported that, with the launch of Heyday, ACE 'has created the separate identity to better target the middle-aged and focuses on the ethos of protest in the 1960s, urging the group to reassert their influence in the modern world'. However, by 2007, the media was reporting Heyday's spectacular failure. 'The venture hoped to attract 300,000 members, for a subscription of £26 each,' wrote Joanna Lyall. 'But its membership stands at 44,000 and the majority of members are aged between 65 and 80':

The Charity Commission has queried the organisation's aims, and three senior managers have resigned over the last year. In a statement last week, the charity said: 'Age Concern England has accepted that its strategy to engage with baby boomers in their 50s and early 60s has not worked. Younger people did not join in the numbers anticipated.' (Lyall 2007, *Guardian*)

### **5.3.2 'From dream to droop'<sup>11</sup>: Living standards and personal debt**

One interesting feature of the Baby Boomer discussion over the 1980s and early 1990s is a heightened anxiety about relatively low living standards, and the levels of personal debt needed by this generation to survive. This contrasts sharply with the portrayal, in 2010-11, of a generation flush with wealth and security, who have borrowed to finance luxuries. In a downbeat article from 1986 on the 'disillusionment of the baby boom generation', the *Times's* Washington correspondent Bailey Morris claims that the American dream 'is turning to ashes for a new generation of "baby boomers" who face downward mobility'. In language strikingly similar to that used in the present-day cultural script to contrast the problems facing young people with the good fortune of their elders, Morris writes:

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<sup>11</sup> Morris (1986, *Times*).

This generation [the Baby Boomers], 78 million people born between 1946 and 1964, is 'much worse off' than the one before it, according to recent statistics. America's streets are not paved with gold but with declining standards of living which make it difficult to own a home and support a family in the style to which the 'baby boomers' are accustomed. (Morris 1986, *Times*)

Morris goes on to spell out what he sees as the causes of the Boomers' downward mobility:

[T]his generation is caught in a financial squeeze marked by soaring costs and declining salaries. The swelling labour force, in which the 'baby boomers' are competing for work against new immigrants and the large number of women who have entered the labour market, has depressed salaries to a point that the median income of men aged 25 to 34 fell 26 per cent between 1973 and 1983, according to the US Census Bureau. Despite the advent of two-career couples, the average family income in the same age group fell by 14 per cent during the same period.

A 30-year-old male head of household, who is paid more than a woman of similar age, earns 10 per cent less in real buying power than his father at the same age; in the 1950s the son earned one-third more. In the 1950s, a 30-year-old male of average income spent an estimated 14 per cent of his total income on a home mortgage; by 1984, the amount had more than tripled to 44 per cent. (Morris 1986, *Times*)

Here, the depressed living standards of the Baby Boomers are attributed to changes in the labour market, resulting from women's employment, immigration, and the changing character of jobs. The spectre of an 'underclass' is raised, to reveal anxieties both about economic inequalities, race, and changing family forms; all of which are seen to be displacing the typical blue-collar family wage. From there, Morris goes on to describe the 'different problems' facing the respectable (white) Baby Boomers – who, it seems, are not dispossessed so much as culturally displaced, and economically disadvantaged by low incomes and a heightened consumer culture:

Increasingly, the life they knew as children is out of their reach, but until recently few were willing to recognize this fact. To this generation appearances mean a lot, which is why the chic restaurants serving high-priced pasta, companies selling BMWs and Mercedes, the up-market clothing stores, have prospered. But the real buying power of this generation is disproportionately low. According to a new study by the US Conference Board, the number of married couples in the 30 to 35 age group who own their own homes has declined to 70 per cent from 75 per cent since 1979 and is continuing to drop. Between 1973 to 1983, mortgage costs more than tripled, as did the cost of a motor car and college. For families in which mothers worked, day-care costs average between dollars 4,000 and dollars 10,000 a year. As a result, recent studies revealed that one-third of the women born in the 1950s do not intend to have any children.

To stay afloat, families are accumulating personal debt at record levels. 'If they can put it on plastic, they think they can afford it,' said Mark Jacobson, a personal finance consultant. (Morris 1986, *Times*)

In citing this article at length, the intention is not to endorse Morris's account of the relative disadvantage of the Baby Boomers, nor his explanations for the problem: working women, immigration, and the welfare 'underclass'. However, the article does draw attention to the variations in the experiences of individuals within the Baby Boomer generation, and the extent to which they have been affected by wider social changes. Furthermore, the claim that Baby Boomers are being discouraged from having children because of the costs of living and, in particular, daycare, strikingly prefigures the argument that Howker and Malik (2010a) currently make about the younger, 'jilted generation' being infantilised by its struggle to get on the housing ladder. This, like Matthews's (1987) article, discussed above, indicates that the dynamic appears to be resentment against any older, relatively more affluent generation, rather than the Baby Boomers themselves.

The idea of the relative low incomes of the American Baby Boomers is repeated in a report on a poll, which 'included the baby boom generation of 25 to 40-

year-olds who are said by the experts to have lower real incomes than their parents' generation' (Bremner 1987, *Times*). In the British context, a report on a survey by the church charity organization Familybase draws attention to rising debt levels amongst the average family (Morgan 1987, *Times*).

As noted previously, in articles about the Baby Boomers that appear nearer to the present day, the assumption that this is a wealthy generation hardens, alongside the presentation of the Boomers as newly-retired (despite the fact in 2010-11, only a tiny proportion of the cohort had reached the age of 65). However, even in this latter period there is some recognition that the portrait of a selfish generation hoarding its wealth is rather one-sided.

A *Daily Mail* article headlined 'The baby boomers left paying for their children and parents' (Doughty 2007) reports on a poll carried out for the insurer Engage Mutual, which found that 'six out of ten people aged between 55 and 64 are still supporting their children': 'A quarter are paying their children's debts; a fifth are paying childcare bills; and another fifth are paying towards a deposit on a house or flat for their children, helping out with the mortgage, or contributing towards home improvements'. At the same time, 'Four out of ten baby boomers are also supporting their own parents'. Describing this as a 'two-way stretch', Steve Doughty also notes:

The need to support both younger and older generations is increasing at a time when many people approaching retirement are finding their expectations for the future reduced by the collapse of final salary pension schemes and lower levels of potential income from other kinds of pension. (Doughty 2007, *Daily Mail*)

'Greedy children desperate for the death of their parents so they can inherit their wealth have long been the villains of countless novels and films. But in modern, middle-class Britain the reality is quite different,' begins Richard Dyson (2009), in a *Mail on Sunday* article challenging the stereotypical greed of the Baby Boomers. 'A growing body of research shows that far from being grasping, the baby-boomer generation – those born in the Fifties and Sixties – want their parents to spend their wealth on themselves rather than leave it in a will.'



One of the most commonly articulated arguments about the Baby Boomers' affluence, luck, and selfishness, is the extent to which they have benefited from the 'housing boom' of recent years. While this is often presented in the contemporary cultural script as one way in which the young are excluded from property ownership (see Howker and Malik 2010a, Willetts 2010b), media analysis going back over time reveals that this picture is one-sided. This is indicated by news reports claiming that (middle-class) Boomer parents are consciously using their property as a way of financing their retirement, helping their children buy their own houses, or otherwise supporting them financially. Thus, Susan Emmett (2006) quotes Tim, a 63-year-old man who, with his wife, is planning to 'downsize' to a small property and release some capital for his grown-up daughters. 'Neither of us fully trusts our pensions schemes,' says Tim. 'My wife is a hospital doctor and has an NHS pension, but I don't trust the Government to honour their initial conditions. This property makes up the bulk of our retirement planning, but I also want the children to be able to buy their own places'. The article goes on to note:

The amount of wealth inherited directly from property is set to double over the next 15 years, according to Halifax Financial Services. Children of baby-boomers born between the Second World War and the Sixties are collectively set to inherit £360 billion worth of property. (Emmett 2006, *Times*)

Antonia Senior (2007) reports on a survey from Yorkshire Bank, which finds that '[a] quarter of all parents are relying on their children to help them out financially in old age', and another separate survey by GE Life, 'the retirement specialist', which found that 'at least six out of ten over-50s currently help their grown-up children', even though '[m]ore than two thirds of the over-50s received no financial help from their own parents when they were in their twenties'. Senior concludes with an interesting observation, challenging the presumption in much of the cultural script that economic and social changes will lead to increased generational conflict:

There is undoubtedly a tension between generations over cash, with the baby-boomers owning a huge share of our national wealth. Changing demographics and an ageing workforce will wreak big changes on our economy, but also on how we structure ourselves as a society. The most likely outcome of this

tension between generations is not conflict but a new era of co-operation. Nuclear families have been the ideal in the era of the baby-boomer, but the concept of extended families all helping each other may be due a renaissance. (Senior 2007, *Times*)

### 5.3.3 ‘From baby boom to retirement bust’<sup>12</sup>: Pensions, health and social care

The cultural script of 2010-11 tends to discuss the Baby Boomers’ pensions as though they have been a gift, in the form of state pensions, generous public-sector ‘final salary’ pensions, or the happy products of a swollen stock market. ‘The baby boomers are [a] “retirement aristocracy”, with lucrative pensions paid for by – but unavailable to – younger workers,’ writes Olinka Koster (2009) in the *Daily Mail*. This script also implies that the current pensions crisis is caused in large part by the Baby Boomers’ tendency to spend too much and save too little: ‘the piggy bank has been comprehensively raided,’ writes Sarah Vine in the *Times* (2008). However, some of the articles published over the past 26 years present a rather different picture.

For example, a 1987 article by Andrew Tylecote of the School of Management and Economic Studies at Sheffield University discusses ‘how the baby boom deepened the depression’, but presented the problem as one of under-spending rather than over-spending. Tylecote’s discussion of Keynes’s ‘paradox of thrift’ contains echoes of the preoccupation with the Baby Boomers as a consumer group, described above:

One day, those of us B-Bs who last so long, will spend those pensions we are paying for now: and when we do so we shall put a great deal of purchasing power into the economy. But now we are saving, massively, and that saving is not much offset by the spending of the retired, because, first, there are not enough of them, and second, few of them have the ‘funded’ pensions we will have – most of the spending, such as it is, is from state pensions paid for by

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<sup>12</sup> Benady (1999b, *Guardian*).

our national insurance contributions and taxes – that is, by yet another chunk lopped off our purchasing power.

It is some 50 years now since Keynes explained his paradox of thrift: that if people chose to save (ie refrain from spending) more than was invested (in bricks and mortar, machinery etc. – anything that generated demand in the economy), there would be a deficiency of demand, which would lead to unemployment and a fall in the national income. There is such a deficiency of demand, and we thrifty B-Bs are partly responsible for it. (Tylecote 1987, *Guardian*)

The pension schemes to which most members of the Baby Boomer cohort are assumed to belong were not always perceived as wildly generous, and some have pointed out that the returns on many Baby Boomers' pension schemes have been much lower than was promised. 'Most of us have got the message that the state will not be able to provide for us in old age,' writes Alex Benady (1999b), which is 'why at the last count there were 10m private pensions in operation'. But, he continues, 'exactly the same forces that make the state pension such a dismal prospect are also at work on our private pensions':

When the baby boomers start to retire in the middle of the next decade in the US and a few years later in the UK, they will liquidate their assets *en masse*. But they will be selling on to the far smaller cohort of 'baby busters'.

All the factors that have pushed up share prices over the past decade would go into reverse. Just as the state pension will be funded by fewer productive workers supporting more retirees, so share prices and hence the value of private pensions will be hit by the triple whammy of lower demand for products, fewer productive workers and lower demand for shares. The result, says Benjamin Meuli, managing director in London of investment bank JP Morgan, will be 'the longest bear market in history.' (Benady 199b, *Guardian*)

A similar argument is made 10 years later, in an article headlined 'This is the worst time in living memory to retire'. James Salmon (2009, *Daily Mail*) writes about a report by Dr Ros Altmann, 'one of Britain's top pensions experts' (who went on to

become Chief Executive of Saga), which highlights how the Baby Boomers, having been ‘told to place their faith in shares’, have ‘become the first generation to lose money on their pensions and to retire poorer than their parents’.

While the cultural script speaks to the idea of willingly-retired Boomers becoming a burden on younger generations, this coexists with an ongoing anxiety about unemployment amongst the over-50s. Headlines such as ‘Baby boomers forced out of work, says TUC’ (Milner 2006, *Guardian*) indicate some resonance for the claim that Baby Boomers who want to be economically active are forced into an early retirement. Indeed, this problem was recognised by the Pensions Commission (2005), whose work (often referred to as the ‘Turner Report’) represented a major policy endeavour by the New Labour government. The Turner Report was presented by the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions John Hutton as an ‘important milestone’ towards a ‘lasting pensions settlement for future generations’ (Department for Work and Pensions 2005). Alongside its key proposal of an increase in the retirement age, the report sought to encourage older workers to defer taking their state pension, and to apply age discrimination legislation to over 65s.

However, we can also detect a reluctance to ‘solve’ the pensions crisis through encouraging people to work for longer, because of fears that – in the words of a headline that appeared in 2013 – ‘The over-50s squeeze young out of jobs’ (Cooper 2013). In 1996, an article in *Compensation and Benefits Review* warned that ‘Employers face the prospect of disgruntled, aging baby boomers hanging on because they can’t afford to retire’ (Cole and Taylor 1996, p. 32), and this notion that an older workforce causes problems both for employers (because of their relatively higher wages and perceived lack of up-to-date skills and personal flexibility) and for young people (because of the assumption that there are a limited number of jobs, which the Baby Boomers are monopolising).

This argument is articulated by the *Guardian*’s Polly Toynbee (1998), in a polemic against age discrimination legislation. ‘By the time my generation reaches retirement in 10 to 15 years, we shall have anti-discrimination laws as strong as those in America,’ she writes. ‘For we will refuse to go. Those of us in jobs we cherish will hold on to them until we drop. We are the postwar Bulge Babies (as we were

inelegantly called before the more flattering Americanism “Baby Boomer”), and we’ve always had everything our way’. Toynbee continues:

The young should take fright at any attempt to bring in American-type legislation here. Our children are having a far harder time getting started in life than we had and they shouldn’t let us keep the best jobs forever... Already the young will have to pay our pensions and our care, lumbered with our improvidence since we never paid into a genuine national insurance fund.

(Toynbee 1998, *Guardian*)

By way of explanation for the Boomers’ perceived success in protecting their own interests in the labour market, Toynbee talks about the active US grey lobby, and its British equivalent: ‘In America, 33 million old people belong to the Association of Retired Persons, and it has the politicians in the palm of its hand’. Chapter 6 will return to this long-running discussion about the demographic advantage conferred on the Boomers in relation to political power.

The ‘pensions crisis’ predicted as a consequence of the retiring Baby Boomers seemed to achieve the status of a concrete reality in 2007, when the first US Baby Boomer applied for a state pension. ‘A retired New Jersey schoolteacher has become the first American baby boomer to apply for her government pension as the ageing nation braces for a “silver tsunami” that threatens to bankrupt its social security system,’ begins Bone (2007). This article goes on to present the problem with America’s social security system as one of sheer numbers:

The problem is demographic: the current number of 37 million Americans over the age of 65 is due to double to nearly 80 million by 2045, while the size of the workforce is expected to increase by only 20 per cent. At the end of the Second World War, a decade after Social Security was created, there were 42 workers paying into the system for every retired person receiving a pension. Now there are just three, and by 2030 there will only be two – so that every working couple will effectively have their own retired person to support. (Bone 2007, *Times*)

Bone cites Michael Astrue, then Social Security commissioner, who ‘has warned of a “silver tsunami” that could swamp the system’. This claim forms the basis of an article published in the *Guardian* one day later under the headline ‘Demographics: The “silver tsunami” that threatens to overwhelm US social security system’, which also reports on ‘America’s first baby boomer’ applying for her pension. Here, Suzanne Goldenberg cites William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution: ‘It seems that at every age that the baby boomers tended to be is the age that is the age to be... They are certainly going to be at the centre, just by virtue of their size’ (Goldenberg 2007).

Media analysis of the period 1986-2011 indicates that, by the time the first Baby Boomers drew their state pensions, this event had already been framed in the language of disaster. I explore this point at length in section 5.4 below, which analyses the motif of ‘Boomergeddon’. This motif, which has been credited to the California-based academic Mike Males (Harkin 2006, *Guardian*), was imported into the British press in 2006 and, I suggest, provides the clearest example of the way that the claim that the Baby Boomers are an economic problem becomes moralised, through bringing together a cultural critique of the Boomers’ alleged attitudes and behaviour with the financial reality of a large cohort reaching retirement.

Before that, however, it is worth briefly reflecting on what we might term ‘the paradox of longevity’. This is that what might otherwise be seen as a ‘good news story’ – people living for longer, and enjoying a generally healthier ‘young-old’ or ‘third’ age – comes to be presented as problematic, because of the concomitant demands on state-supported systems of health and social care. In this regard, economic, demographic and cultural factors are often mixed together to make the claim that longevity is problematic.

This achieves its sharpest focus in discussions about healthcare rationing and euthanasia. In the earliest dataset (1986-7), two articles (Moorhead 1987; Shearer 1987) covered the publication of the influential edited collection *Our Aging Society*, mentioned above, and the accompanying lecture given by the Carnegie Corporation’s Alan Pifer at the RSA in London. Shearer reports:

We may not like to think that we ration heroic medical efforts by age, any more than Americans like to think that they ration them by income. We may not wish either to decide when old lives should, or should not, be prolonged, preferring on that side of the Atlantic to leave it to the courts and on this to the humanity of the professionals. But these issues are going to come into ever-sharper focus. (Shearer 1987, *Guardian*)

Healthcare rationing concerns appear to be linked to a wider ‘responsibilisation’ agenda, which encourages individuals to assume that they should not expect treatment for illnesses that could be seen to be their own fault; and here the moralised character about the (ill) health of the Baby Boomers is explicit. ‘They were the first to enjoy free health care, and had the time of their lives in the Swinging Sixties,’ writes Fiona MacRae (2009) in the *Daily Mail*. ‘But the post-war “baby boomers” are now paying the price’. This ‘price’ is posed in terms of obesity (‘Health timebomb hits Baby Boomers: Generation now entering their 60s suffer more illnesses caused by bad diet and lack of exercise’ (MacRae 2009)), and alcohol consumption (‘Health alert for the baby boom drinkers’ (Macaskill 2006, *Daily Mail*); ‘The Mid-Lifebingers’ (Feinmann 2006, *Daily Mail*)). Some headlines appear directly contradictory: for example, the claim that ‘Middle-class men “will beat heart attacks by 2025”’ (Hope 1999, *Daily Mail*) is followed eight years later by the claim that ‘A generation faces years of misery due to heart disease’ (Hawkes 2007, *Times*).

#### **5.4 ‘Boomergeddon’: The Boomer ‘nightmare’<sup>13</sup> becomes a reality**

The sections above have explored the themes that have emerged over time to frame the Baby Boomers as an economic problem. I have noted some of the contradictory assertions that have been made, and suggest that while the Boomers have been linked to economic issues since 1986, it is only in the period around 2006-7 that the cultural script hardens into the claim that this generation constitutes an economic *problem*.

As discussed in Chapter 3, searches of the frequency with which the term ‘Baby Boomer’ appears in British newspaper articles reveal a spike at the date period

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<sup>13</sup> Moorhead (1987, *Times*); Shearer (1987, *Guardian*).

2006-7. This date period yielded a total of 448 articles – barely fewer than in 2010-11. After qualitative analysis, it is clear that the cultural script of the problem is far less developed than it is in 2010-11: but compared with previous periods, in 2006-7 we can see some deliberate attempts to formulate the Baby Boomers as a social problem.

The clearest example of this is the discussion of ‘Boomergeddon’ in the USA, which becomes reported in (and to an extent, imported into) the UK. This discussion is linked to the first wave of US Baby Boomers drawing their pensions, and leads into claims about how the US social care system will be able to cope. Boomergeddon provides a clear example of the ‘diffusion’ of the Baby Boomer problem, in which claims made in the USA are moulded to describe the British situation.

We should note that the idea of Boomergeddon, which essentially spoke to a moralised set of fears about the impact of the Baby Boomers’ retirement upon the public purse, pre-dates the financial crisis. This could suggest that, as Anatole Kaletsky (2010) contends in the *Times*, the ‘true significance’ of this crisis was to bring forward an already ‘unsustainable’ situation ‘caused by the ageing of the baby boomers’. Alternatively, the fact the notion of Boomergeddon preceded the financial crisis could indicate that the problems attributed to the demographic consequences of the ageing Baby Boomers are more accurately explained by wider social, political, and economic factors (Furedi 1997; Mullan 2000; Walker 1996).

‘Boomergeddon’, explains James Harkin in the *Guardian* (2006), is ‘the not-too-subtle working title of a new book being written by the American sociologist Mike Males’. In searches conducted in 2013, I could not find a record of Males’s book of this title ever having been published: though the search did reveal a book by James A. Bacon published in 2010, titled *Boomergeddon: How Runaway Deficits Will Bankrupt the Country and Ruin Retirement for Ageing Baby Boomers – And What You Can Do About It*, and promoting a rather different theme. One immediately interesting feature of Males’s ‘Boomergeddon’, therefore, is the extent to which it attracted attention and commentary in the British press without even having been published.

Harkin’s brief article neatly summarises what he perceives to be an escalation of claims regarding the Baby Boomers as a problem. He begins with a reference to the



Rolling Stones, whose re-emergence on the international concert scene around this time is widely referenced as symbolic of something about the Baby Boomers. For Harkin, '[t]hat the Stones are still allowed on stage at all is a shining example of what the music journalist John Strausbaugh has dubbed "colostomy rock" – the continued weight exerted by baby boomers on what was previously thought of as youth culture'. The ongoing fascination with the Boomers' dominance of the music scene is emblematic, throughout the datasets analysed in this thesis, of the extent to which the Sixties continues to hold society in thrall, both in a positive nostalgic fashion, and as the focus of blame for the ills of the present day.

Harkin goes on to note that 'the idea of the baby boomers is an essentially American invention, used to describe the unusually large cohort of babies born between 1946 and 1964 and swollen by a surge of postwar optimism'. He draws attention to the contextual similarities that allow for the diffusion of this concept across the Atlantic: 'Both British and American boomers are now hurtling through the demographic turnstile towards retirement, and the first of them will hit 60 this year'. However, he makes clear that the Boomer problem is informed as much, if not more, by cultural and political factors:

Since they revolutionised every stage of life through which they have passed, say the pundits, they are set to upturn the business of growing old. Because they refuse to relinquish the attributes of rebellious youth, the new middle-aged continue to crave the attentions of marketeers and advertisers. They also, apparently, wield huge political clout. According to a report published by Age Concern earlier this month, it is boomers rather than the twenty-somethings coveted by David Cameron who are key to winning the next general election – and most of them haven't yet made their mind up yet how to vote. (Harkin 2006)

Here, Harkin alludes to some key points in the construction of the Baby Boomer problem, discussed above and in the next chapter. First, there is the interest in the Boomer cohort as a focus for marketing and consumption. Second is the perceived significance of the number of votes held by the Boomers compared with other cohorts.

Third is the recognition of certain organisations (in this case, the charity Age Concern) as claimsmakers in the Baby Boomer debate.

However, Harkin notes that these relatively familiar cultural tropes of the Baby Boomers are, in 2006, provoking ‘a thundering backlash’:

‘Balding, Wrinkled and Stoned’ was the less-than-flattering strapline for a *Time* magazine last month, one which painted a picture of a generation whose continued proclivity for illicit drugs is embarrassing even their children. In a barrage of new books, too, social critics from both right and left are taking aim at the new middle-aged. (Harkin 2006)

Thus, we have the clear identification of a turning-point in the Baby Boomer discourse in the USA. Males’s work-in-progress *Boomergeddon* is one example of the backlash, writes Harkin: ‘Males will agree that American boomers have smuggled their free-thinking, hell-raising values into middle age, but argue that, as a result, they are the fastest growing demographic group to be involved in serious crime and the most likely to have HIV’. In this way, Males promotes the idea that the non-conformist radicalism of the caricatured Sixties youth has resulted in a behavioural norm that is irresponsible, unhealthy and antisocial.

Males’s ‘Boomergeddon’ claim is pursued vigorously in an article written two months later by the influential, and notoriously ‘right-wing’, British commentator Melanie Phillips. Harkin and Phillips engage with the Boomergeddon thesis from quite different perspectives, and it is thus worth looking in some detail at the similarities and differences in their observations. Phillips’s essay, published in the *Daily Mail*, begins with similar observations to Harkin: the Rolling Stones concert indicates a ‘renaissance’ in live rock concerts ‘fuelled in large measure by middle-aged fans – the ‘baby-boomer’ generation born in the great surge of procreation and optimism that took place between the end of World War II and the early Sixties’. She continues:

This is the generation that, through its sheer numbers and awesome purchasing power, has forged the culture of the post-war Western world in its own image.

It is also a generation, I would argue, that is gripped by the need perpetually to rebel. But now there is a backlash. (Phillips 2006)

Phillips briefly outlines the Mike Males thesis, which contrasts the Boomers' alleged degeneracy with the responsible behaviour of the young:

Californian boomers, he says, suffer staggeringly high levels of drug abuse, imprisonment and family instability. They have the worst rate of violent death; fatal drug overdoses between the ages of 40 and 60 have increased by 200 per cent over the past 35 years; and more and more of them have Aids.

The young, meanwhile, who are demonised by their parents' generation and subjected to overwhelming and unnecessary restrictions, are moderating their smoking, drinking and drug use, while school dropout rates, youth crime and teenage pregnancies and suicides are all down. The generation blame game has flipped on its head. (Phillips 2006)

As noted in Chapter 4, the notion that the 'normal' generational pattern has 'flipped on its head', with the young now taking responsibility for their dissolute elders, recurs throughout the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem: as expressed by the notion that the Boomers' children are clearing up the 'mess' of their party.

Exemplifying one way in which the Boomer problem is diffused from the USA to Britain, Phillips's essay goes on to discuss the Males thesis with reference to what she sees occurring in Britain. In short, Phillips believes that British youth may have learned some lessons from their parents' bad behaviour – 'Many young people have also learned firsthand the bitter cost of irresponsibility from the bust-up of their parents' marriages. Young women fret over whether there's a difficult choice to be made between motherhood and career' – but, in general, 'The vast majority of British crime is still committed by young people; teenage pregnancy and school truancy are still huge problems; and the proportion of teenagers with mental health problems has doubled since 1980, with dramatic rises also in eating disorders, binge-drinking and, of course, drug addiction' (Phillips 2006).

Here, Phillips' article indicates the extent to which the blaming of one generation rarely leads to the lauding of another. One of the features of 'generationalism' (White 2013) is that problems that are identified in these terms tend to be perceived as infecting subsequent generations. Thus, states Phillips, 'Young people here are thus still suffering the effects of a generation that grew from childhood into immaturity and which, having taken power, has remade Britain in the image of the counterculture of social revolt'.

Phillips acknowledges that 'huge and complex cultural trends such as family breakdown, sexual licence or drug-taking can't all be laid at the boomers' door'. Nonetheless, she makes a clear argument that affluence and peace-time are intimately linked to the narcissism and nihilism of the Baby Boomers, 'the generation which still marched behind the banners of the ultrafeminist, family-smashing, bourgeois-hating radical politics of the Sixties in which they had grown up'. For Phillips, it was the 'unprecedented prosperity' of the Boomers that gave them:

...the means finally to flesh out trends going back to the 19th century, arising from the collapse of religious belief and the emergence of a doctrine of radical individualism. This had been held in check by the national emergencies of two world wars and a world depression, but after 1945 there was no longer any impediment to letting rip with a cult of 'me', a licence to be irresponsibly self-indulgent and never grow up. (Phillips 2006)

Here, Phillips makes a dizzying number of assertions; indicating the extent to which moral and political critiques are bound up with the construction of the Boomers as an economic problem. In Phillips' presentation, affluence and peace-time give rise to 'the cult of "me"'. Added to this, the culture of personal liberation associated with the Sixties allegedly leads to the destruction of the family, which in turn leads to a greater economic dependency on the State; and the weakening of both formal and informal mechanisms of social control leads to more social problems.

In Phillips' account, the circumstances that allowed the Baby Boomers to have 'so much influence' also help to explain why they have 'used it to such socially destructive ends'. It is worth noting the similarity, here, between Phillips's *Daily Mail*

critique and that put forward by Will Hutton in the *Observer* (2010), discussed in Chapter 4. These two commentators come from opposite sides of the political spectrum, and their views on most issues have little in common: yet when it comes to the articulation of the Baby Boomer problem, their very different starting points lead to a similar conclusion, discussed even in similar language.

Moving to the wider cultural critique of the Baby Boomers, Harkin offers another example from the ‘barrage of new books’ criticising the Baby Boomers. This is *Balsamic Dreams*, by the American satirist Joe Queenan (2001), which ‘accuses baby boomers of self-importance, narcissism and selling out’, and was published in the UK in February 2006:

The boomers, [Queenan] argues, lived it up on state subsidies in their salad days and are now determined to kick away the ladder of social security for everyone else. Their determination to be different, he says, has turned sour and embarrassing. He pokes fun, for example, at the way in which American boomers are customising their own funeral services into a mixture of stand-up comedy and karaoke. (Harkin 2006)

Phillips also references Queenan, according him much greater depth. Queenan says that ‘the boomers were the first generation who sold out while insisting that they had not. “They professed to go with the flow,” he writes, “but it was actually the cash flow.”’ From this, Phillips again extrapolates to Britain:

Thus they dress in jeans and a single earring and wear their hair in ponytails (and that’s the men) but live in £3million-plus houses in London’s Notting Hill and Hampstead. They support Amnesty International and have Greenpeace stickers on their 4x4s, but work in junk bonds or City law firms.

With their children departed and the mortgage paid off, their spending power is greater than that of any other age group. They use it to pump up their lips and suck out their thighs, go trekking in Peru and work out in the gym, eat organic food and irrigate their colon to cheat death and anticipate several more decades of looking after Me.

They claim credit for all the good things that have developed in the 60 years of their existence – greater tolerance, an end to racial discrimination, a kinder, gentler, more compassionate world.

But presented with any of the bad things – the shattering of the family, the breakdown in civility, feral children, the drug epidemic, the burgeoning of mental illness among the young, increasing contempt for the aged – they savagely disclaim any responsibility. (Phillips 2006)

My own reading of Queenan's *Balsamic Dreams* is that the book is essentially a humorous set of reflections on some of the peculiarities and contradictions exhibited by what is widely regarded as Baby Boomer culture. For Phillips to draw from this book the profound conclusions that she does about the 'real' impact of the Baby Boomers on contemporary British society indicates that her concerns have been formed by a much wider and deeper set of claims. However, the fact that humorous reflections on Baby Boomer excess (as in, for example, the cult British sit-com *Absolutely Fabulous*) can easily become the metaphor for more serious critiques of social breakdown, perceived political mismanagement, and economic crisis (Vine 2010), reveals the extent to which perceptions and quasi-fictional representations of 'Boomer culture' have come to serve the function of a metaphorical 'hook' on which to hang social criticism in the present day.

Concluding the discussion of 'Boomergeddon', it is worth drawing attention to the difference in the balance that Phillips and Harkin place upon the idea that the Boomers constitute a social problem. Phillips contends that 'the boomers' chickens are coming home to roost'. 'Social irresponsibility is a luxury that is possible only at a time of peace and prosperity,' she writes. 'But with the nation's security and tranquillity now threatened from within and without, the boomers are getting anxious. So they are beginning to rethink issues such as social cohesion, patriotism and the culture of grievance. But the barren landscape that is now causing them such unease is the one they themselves have laid waste' (Phillips 2006).

Harkin, on the other hand, ends his article by speaking to some of the larger questions explored in this thesis. The first is that '[t]he problem with the generational

blame game is that it fails to do justice to the other things which motivate politics and social change'. The second is that:

In any case, British baby boomers do not have the same misplaced sense of generational solidarity as do their American cousins. Quite the opposite. The irony of communicating with British baby boomers, as every advertiser already knows, is that many of them don't identify with themselves at all, but someone 20 years younger. (Harkin 2006)

It might be possible to view Harkin's and Phillips's discussion of the Boomerageddon thesis as simply an attempt to engage with an interesting cultural motif, around which the commentator can make some broader points. However, the concept of Boomerageddon subsequently plays a role in framing some of the more concrete events indicating the potential problems allegedly caused by an ageing population.

For example, in October 2006, the *Times* published an article under the headline 'Golden State faces Boomerageddon as "me generation" turns it grey', which bring together the elements of the cultural critique discussed by Harkin and Phillips with the economic reality of the upcoming pensions crisis. Catherine Philp begins by stating that California 'is a land synonymous with all things youthful, from golden beach babes and surfer dudes to twenty-something dotcom millionaires and aspiring young starlets'; but this image is 'to be turned upside down in the coming decade as a tidal wave of retiring baby boomers turns it from the Golden State to the greyest', with the state's 'senior population set to double by 2020' (Philp 2006).

Philp goes on to reference Males's 'Boomerageddon' motif, arguing that the Baby Boomers' reluctance to face the prospect of growing old will have negative consequences for that generation and for others:

While they may have been the wealthiest generation, they have also been the highest-spending, enjoying lavish lifestyles their parents could only dream of.

Few have saved adequately for a retirement that may last as long as their working lives. Yet only a third say they expect to scale back their lifestyle. And while past generations may have had their own health problems, baby

boomers are bringing a whole new set into their senior years, refusing to let go of their old ways of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll. (Philp 2006)

While Phillips emphasised the negative health consequences of the Boomers' 'rock'n'roll' lifestyle, Philp argues that it is in fact, 'For all those ageing rockers... there are many more baby boomers that have been dutifully eating their granola and practising their yoga. But their longevity is likely to be an equal burden on society':

'Living longer will bring more chronic illnesses,' says Patty Berg, the chair of the Californian assembly's committee on ageing, which faces the task of preparing for the onslaught of retiring baby boomers. Half of those who live past 85 can expect to develop dementia.

'The challenges are going to be enormous. No state has ever seen a demographic shift like this. There is no roadmap because it's never happened before.' (Philp 2006)

As discussed above, the paradox of longevity that emerges through the cultural script of the Baby Boomer is one of the starkest manifestations of the way that the interests of the younger and older generations are presented as being in conflict. Philp emphasises this conflict, through citing again Males and Queenan, and using language familiar from Harkin and Phillips. 'We are extraordinarily tax-adverse,' says Males, and the baby boomers' 'fiscal conservatism' is an 'outrageous betrayal'. Philp writes:

When they were children, taxes in California were 30 per cent higher simply to fund the schooling of the largest generation ever. Having lived it up on state subsidies in their youth, they now seem determined to kick away the ladder for all those below.

Joe Queenan, the American satirist who labelled the generation the 'most obnoxious' in history, said: 'Baby boomers are unbelievably selfish'. (Philp 2006)

By the autumn of 2006, then, we can see that a number of core themes have already been played out around the fear of the consequences of the Baby Boomer generation reaching retirement. This discussion precedes the global financial crisis of 2007, but



draws upon wider anxieties about state spending, the impact of an ageing population, and a perceived crisis of social control arising from the dominant outlook of the 'Me Generation' (Phillips 2006; Philp 2006; Wolfe 1976). 'Boomergeddon' becomes both a clear articulation of crisis thinking, and an overt statement of generational conflict. As Philp puts it:

'(Baby boomers) are going to make some difficult demands on the younger generation,' says Mr Males. 'I predict open inter-generational warfare.'

That, at least, is something the baby boomers know about. (Philp 2006)

## **5.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have discussed the various ways in which the Baby Boomers have become constructed as an economic problem over the past 26 years. This development is situated within the context of a wider 'demographic consciousness', which (over)emphasises the significance of both absolute and relative numbers of older people. Claims made about the Baby Boomers as an economic problem in the cultural script of 2010-11 are implicitly or explicitly contested by claims that have been made in previous years, and claims about the Boomers' economic circumstances are moralised through a wider, cultural critique of this generation's alleged attitudes and behaviour.

In Chapter 6, I examine the construction of the Baby Boomers as a cultural problem, and focus on three key points. First, sociological interest in the Boomer generation, both in their youth and today, is situated within a wider interest in the Sixties and the 'culture wars' that ensued. The apparent backlash against the Boomers today can, at least in part, be understood as the latest phase in a wider reaction against the aspirations and developments of the Sixties.

Second, I discuss the development of the politics of age. I contend that while this takes the form of the explicit articulation of a generational shift, in fact it represents a combination of conflicts and developments that are not about age, or generation, at all. Just as this chapter has noted how debates about the welfare state become mapped on to claims about the problem of ageing in general and the Baby

Boomers in particular, so the next chapter examines how a wider crisis of political and cultural authority comes to take the form of an overt ‘clash of generations’.

Third, I draw upon the vast body of literature about the problem of generations as it appeared in the Sixties, and the ‘crisis thinking’ that dominated the reaction of the Seventies, to compare and contrast the (relative) optimism surrounding the apparent ascendancy of the Baby Boomers in the political arena in the 1990s with the negativity surrounding that generation in the period since 2006. Through an in-depth analysis of the British media coverage of the election of US President Bill Clinton in 1993, I suggest that the Nineties can be regarded, in some respects, as a pale imitation of the Sixties. The Clinton election, and the subsequent election of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, were widely regarded in generational terms, as representing a kind of politics that was new, youthful, and built (albeit in a limited sense) on some of the values and aspirations of the Sixties.

There are of course significant differences between the Sixties and the Nineties, both in terms of real events and the discourse surrounding them. Nonetheless, it is possible to draw some comparisons between the way in which the Seventies has been regarded as ‘a kind of prolonged “morning after” to the euphoria and excesses of the Sixties’ (Booker 1980, p. 7), and the way that the current cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem could be seen to articulate a painful hangover from the economic and cultural ideas that were played out over the Clinton/Blair era.

## **Chapter 6 The Baby Boomers as a cultural problem**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter discussed the emergence of the 'Boomergeddon' motif as an example of the way in which the 'economic problem' of the Boomers' demographic size becomes moralised through a cultural critique of the political and personal behaviour associated with the 'Sixties generation'. It also indicated how, in turn, the construction of the Boomers as an economic problem concretises this cultural critique. This chapter describes the emergence of a cultural critique of the Boomers.

Here, I show that the personal, political and cultural characteristics associated with the Boomers derive from a heightened interest in a particular 'generation unit', which has subsequently framed the definition of the 'Sixties generation'. Running underneath the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem appears to be a long-running ambivalence about the extent to which the values, politics and behaviour of the 'Sixties generation' represent a move in the direction of positive social change, or a cause and consequence of the institutional and cultural turmoil that has defined Anglo-American society in the postwar period. This ambivalence is sharply revealed, first, in the academic literature of the early 1970s that sought to comprehend and evaluate the student protest movement. It is revealed again in the early 1990s, when the election of Bill Clinton as America's first 'Baby Boomer' president was widely understood to represent the seizing of mainstream power by the Sixties generation unit. Both these are significant points in the diffusion of the Baby Boomer problem from the USA to Britain, for although they relate to events that were primarily taking place in the USA, and are primarily framed by analysis from the USA, they have sufficient relevance to become incorporated into British discussions of the moment.

Analysis of the period 1992-3 finds that, while the personal, political and cultural characteristics associated with the Boomers are essentially the same as they are in the present day, they are framed in a much more positive light. Only with the exhaustion of the Baby Boomer presidency in the USA, and its British sibling, the New Labour administration led by Tony Blair in Britain, did the cultural critique of the

Sixties generation (and by default, the Boomer generation as a whole) harden into the claim that the Boomers constitute a cultural problem.

Implicit in the material discussed below are some significant economic, social, cultural changes, with both reflect and shape the changing role of women in society, the balance of class politics, and the role of the welfare state, amongst other important developments. Unfortunately, there is no scope in this thesis to explore these important trends in the depth that they deserve. Nor is there scope to do more than hint at some of the particular manifestations of these trends that became clear in the 1990s, and specifically, at the time of the Clinton election. The historical account of this period provided below is necessarily schematic, and focuses on the questions most pertinent to my research question: that is, why the Baby Boomers *as a generation* have become constructed as a social problem in Britain today.

This means that certain themes are prioritised, such as the discussion of the Clinton election as having a distinctly generational character; and others are merely touched upon or not engaged with, such as the gendered character of much of the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem, and the importance of race in shaping American politics and identity. Because of the tight focus on the research question, the material discussed below gives neither a complete picture of the experience of the Baby Boomer generation in the 1990s, nor the historical experience of the 1990s itself, in which the Clinton election and its impact on Britain was only one of many significant events.

Several elements of the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem are synthesised through a substantial editorial in the *Guardian* newspaper (*Guardian* 1992); although, as I illustrate, these elements are discussed more widely in the British press at this time. The *Guardian* editorial was selected for close analysis partly because it brought together many of the claims and observations made more widely in the media coverage, and because this newspaper was favourably disposed to the possibilities that seemed to be offered by the ‘Baby Boomer’ election. In other words, the *Guardian* was not, in 1992, making the claim that the Boomer generation was problematic – and again, this spoke to wider sentiment at the time, where the perception of generational political change was largely greeted with a cautious

optimism. The themes discussed in that editorial, and reflected in the wider media discourse, relate both the historical discussion of the 'Sixties generation' as a radical, counter-cultural force and the social and political context of the 1990s itself, in which demographic pressures, the perceived need for reform of the welfare state, and the move towards a more coherent brand of centrist politics. Because of the extent to which they highlight the degree of continuity and change within the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem from the Sixties to the Nineties, I have paid particular attention to these themes.

## **6.2 The 'Sixties generation'**

As noted in Chapter 2, the events of the Sixties, which reached their peak in the 'historic year' of 1968 (Marwick 1999, p. 584) provoked a heightened interest in the sociology of generations. The turmoil of these years is associated, in the cultural imagination, with a new focus on politicised youth. The self-conscious 'politics of age' was most strikingly illustrated by the phrase uttered by Jack Weinberg of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, 'Don't trust anybody over 30'. Although Weinberg in latter years has claimed that he uttered this phrase mainly to discourage a reporter who was annoying him, his memory that the phrase 'went from journalist to journalist, then leaders in the movement started using it because they saw the extent it shook up the older generation' (*Berkeley Daily Planet* 2000) indicates the resonance at that time for the idea that events of the Sixties were driven by a collision of the young against their elders. In the academic literature of the time, the 'generational' element of the Sixties helped to mark out the Baby Boomers as the object of intense study (see Keniston and Lerner 1971); and as the Sixties have become history, events of this time have continued to be framed in generational terms.

It is of course important to note that generation is not the only frame through which the Sixties are discussed. Particularly in the USA, the more significant social cleavage of race was expressed through the civil rights movement. This was followed by, and intersected with, the anti-war movement, and the women's movement, all of which have assumed an historical relationship with the Sixties and their aftermath. Each of these movements and the wider social shifts to which they are dedicated deserves its own, dedicated account, and there is no space to do justice to them here.

By a similar token, the magnitude of social and cultural changes associated with the Sixties at the time and through the prism of history and myth-making cannot be properly engaged with in this thesis. ‘What is unique about the 1960s is that we are living with a number of competing (and, sometimes, contradictory) popular meanings – not one consensus, but several’, in which visions of the period ‘can contradict each other and still coexist in the popular imagination,’ writes Alexander Bloom (2001, p. 4). In an editorial explaining why, in 2008, they established a new journal dedicated to exploring ‘the meaning of the Sixties’, Varon, Foley and McMillian (2008) emphasise the magnitude of changes associated with ‘a time that continues to intrigue, inspire, confound, amuse, tempt, repel, and capture us’:

With little coordination but a striking commonality of purpose, so many people in so many settings devoted themselves so ardently to the work of transformation. This passion for change ranged widely, affecting governance, legal and political rights, and the distribution of wealth and power among and within regions, nations, races, ethnicities, and classes. Yet it extended also to more intimate and abstract realms, calling into question the meaning and identity of the family, education, sex and sexuality, adolescence and adulthood, work, pleasure, art, nature, divinity, the psyche, and the cognitive and sensory frames by which we apprehend ‘reality’. As the sum of all this, for a vertiginous spell nothing seemed settled or sacred, everything seemed up for grabs, giving the era the quality of a giant experiment in the mutability of the human condition... (Varon, Foley and McMillian 2008, p. 1)

Major social, cultural and political changes thus form the backdrop to the construction of the ‘Sixties generation’. Within this context, two distinctive features emerge from the literature of this time, which go on to inform the construction of the Boomers as a social problem today. These are the formulation of a new ‘politics of age’, and the focus on a particular ‘generation unit’.

### **6.2.1 The politics of age**

A key shift associated with the Sixties is the shift from the politics of class, which characterised the early twentieth century, to the politics of status. Drawing on Daniel Bell (1976), Turner (1988) explains that status politics ‘involve the assertion of claims for social rights or entitlements against the state by aggregates who experience some form of discrimination by reference to modern, universalistic legislation’. He explains, further:

Insofar as egalitarian universalism is a major criterion of contemporary democracies, citizens will experience various forms of inequality in terms of particularistic status attributes, such as age, gender or ethnicity. (Turner 1988, p. 13)

The emergence of status politics during the 1960s was noted at that time, and self-consciously articulated as a shift away from the class politics of the past. Goertzel’s (1972) article on ‘Generational Conflict and Social Change’ contended that ‘[a]s purely economic equality is losing its force as a source of conflict, conflict on status grounds is increasing’. The ‘movements of black people and other racial and ethnic minorities have been in large part aimed at correcting economic inequalities, but often these economic goals are considered as partly symbolic of a struggle for status, respect, and social equality’, Goertzel writes; and ‘the women’s liberation movement, as well, has been concerned with economic inequities, but also with the inferior social position of women’. Thus, ‘These groups can serve as allies of the youth movement in the struggle for a more humane and egalitarian society’ (Goertzel 1972, pp. 348-9).

A number of other articles published at this time sought to understand to what extent age (and specifically, youth) could indeed become an organising principle of political action, and how that related to the explosion of age-based politics on campuses throughout the USA and Europe. Much of this literature speaks to the anxiety about whether the mobilisation of students around the politics of age is a progressive development, where youth, as a ‘discriminated-against minority in America’ (Friedenberg 1969, p. 32), stands up for itself and joins with others to create a better world; or whether the self-conscious orientation of privileged young people around the politics of age effectively freezes them in the moment of their youth.

Abrams's (1970) attempt to explain the upsurge in student radicalism draws upon 'the large body of survey research on student politics', which indicates that student activists are marginal in number; 'disproportionately recruited from privileged social backgrounds' with liberal and permissive parents; academically particularly high-achieving; and 'concentrated in institutions which even among universities place a particular emphasis on liberal, intellectual and academic values and which, physically, are either very large or very concentrated' (p. 188). This results, he argues, in:

[A]n extreme form, almost a parody, of the general predicament of youth: an upbringing in which the themes of individual responsibility, choice and commitment have always been strong but offset by demands for a loving dependence upon reasonable, non-authoritarian parents; an environment in which ideas, particularly political ideas and abstract values, are taken for granted as a normal element of social intercourse and personal identity; a masterful orientation to the outside world, continuously reinforced by personal success; and then seclusion in a world of virtually identical peers all suddenly denied control over their own experience and destiny while being urged more keenly than ever to interest themselves in very grandiose, pure, abstract values and ideologies. (Abrams 1970, p.188)

The 'standard response', in these circumstances, 'is not activism but alienation, not revolution but bohemianism, youth culture "in itself" but not the youth movement "for itself"', writes Abrams. He distinguishes between 'the political response', where youth recognises its powerlessness and will 'join forces with some relatively more permanent and marginally more powerful group of victims of the society – the workers, the blacks, the old, the peasants', thus 'abandoning age as the basis of conflict' and becoming able to envisage 'a future both for himself and for society'. The 'bohemian response', on the other hand, 'is more defensive, more specifically and exclusively a phenomenon of youth, seeking to defy the life-cycle by working out a style of life, a morality and a culture which are at once distinctively the property of the young and yet capable of being carried forward indefinitely into later life by particular individuals as an alternative to conventional adult mores'. The bohemian response, Abrams contends:



‘[D]oes not envisage a future so much as a standing confrontation between two contrasted accounts of the present. Although the approach is indirect there is a true conflict of generations here, age really is what it is about. (Abrams 1970, p.189)

The question of whether the Baby Boomer generation is associated with a new form of positive, progressive politics, or with a self-indulgent bohemianism that has prevented this generation from growing up and taking responsibility, is a recurring theme in the media discourse from 1986 to 2011.

However, in the academic and mainstream media discussion of the political significance of the Baby Boomer generation, there is a tendency to caricature based on age, rather than other wider experiences. Following Mannheim, Spitzer (1973) notes that ‘the familiar generalizations about the recurrent characteristics of phases of the life cycle are not always helpful’ – for example, explaining the alienation of young Americans in the 1960s ‘by the chronic tropism of the young for radicalism, idealism, frustrated mobility, oedipal hostility, and so forth’ does not help to explain ‘youthful passivity and careerist pragmatism in the... 1950s’ (p. 1363). There are times, he writes, ‘as at present, when significant generational differences seem confined to the conflicts between youth and everybody else’:

This encourages the tendency to consider those historical developments that are linked to age groups solely in relation to the generation gap. Significant generational differences are then reduced to the conflict between father and son, the biological succession of generations is confused with the historical succession of age cohorts, and assumptions regarding patterns of behaviour common to youth at any time and place are fused with descriptions of specific experiences that stamp a permanent collective identity on a given generation. (Spitzer 1973, p. 1364)

One of the key points to emerge from my own research is that historical periods (the Sixties), and political shifts, have been explained in generational terms. This tends to

distort, both the understanding of social events, and the experience and contribution of the Boomers as a particular generation.

### **6.2.2 The emergence of the Sixties generation unit**

Another, related effect of the focus on the Baby Boomers as the protagonists of the Sixties was to typify this generation through a particular *generation unit*, and endow this generation with a distinct (and arguably overstated) sense of agency. The generation unit that typifies the Sixties generation is the (relatively small) proportion of the post-war both cohort that actively participated in the counterculture and the student protest movement. The recent memoir by the British writer Jenny Diski gives an astute summary of the relationship between the actors in this generation, and the context in which they gained significant cultural influence:

We were certainly not in the majority, not even in our own generation. There were far more 'straight' young people than those of us living self-consciously outside the law, dotted about London as well as most other towns and cities in the country. There were enough of us to produce underground papers to pass the news around, to fill the Roundhouse so that we could celebrate the crowd we made, to keep headshops selling pipes and joint papers, and bookshops like Indica and Compendium, busy if not in profit. But, of course, most people took on the world as it was offered to them. (Diski 2010, p. 36)

As Diski notes, that eras become typified through particular generation units is far from unique to the Sixties: 'Possibly apart from the generations that came to adulthood around the start of the First and Second World Wars, most people aren't actively engaged in what any given era is later characterised by. Not everyone in France was fomenting revolution in 1789; only a tiny proportion of the new generation were Bright Young Things of the 1920s.' However, she allows that, 'What may have been different by 1967 was how easy it was to opt out of the world of adults and yet find ready-made social networks to support our dissent. That the majority chose not to, made them, in our eyes, wilfully blind' (Diski 2010, p. 36).

Marwick's history of the Sixties makes a similar point, in relation to the actual size of the groups of hippies and student protestors that dominate the literature, and the wider influence that these groups had in terms of vague support from people living conventional lives. He references the influential American research into hippie communities carried out by Professor Lewis Yablonsky in 1967, and notes that even using 'very wide parameters' to measure the number of hippies, which include 'several hundred thousand students, young executives, and professional people "who use psychedelic drugs, interact, and closely associate with totally dropped-out hippies, yet maintain 9-5 jobs or student status"', 'we are still talking about considerably less than 0.1 per cent of the total American population' (Marwick 1999, p. 480). However, writes Marwick, Yablonsky also recognised that there were larger numbers who had some sympathy with the hippies or student radicals, indicating that the ideas they represented had a far wider purchase at the time. He sums up their impact thus:

The hippies, the yippies, the underground... were important as the souped-up motor, often spluttering, and sometimes malfunctioning, of a wider movement critical of the plastic and the artificial, supportive of the simple and the natural and above all asserting the virtues of frankness and honesty in personal relations. Some did merge into the student movements of 1967-9, and their ideas certainly continued to influence schoolchildren well into the seventies. At a mundane level, for good or ill, hippie, counter-cultural, underground practices had a lasting effect on the lifestyles and leisure activities of important sections of the population. (Marwick 1999, p. 496)

Marwick and Diski here allude to the wider contextual point explored in Chapter 2: that the questioning of tradition and authority associated with the Sixties generation unit had a wider impact because of the relatively weak character of traditional norms and institutions of that time. This is reflected in the academic literature seeking to explore the causes and consequences of the student protest movement, which generally situates the cause of young people's disaffection in the problems of society at that time, and tacitly views youthful rebellion as a catalyst for positive change.

Here again, we see a paradox in the construction of generational agency, in the form of the Baby Boomers: the student protest movement (itself a very small segment

of the generation) was both led by, and justified by, intellectuals from an older generation, whose outlook was arguably formed by more their location within a wider 'adversary culture' (Bell 1972) than by their generation.

This point is taken further by Eisenstadt's (1971) article 'Conflict and Intellectual Antinomianism', which explores the intergenerational interaction that takes place within the university as a reason for understanding why the university became the focus for protest. Eisenstadt begins by noting that 'student rebellion and adolescent violence' can be found throughout the history of human society', and have often indicated some degree of intergenerational conflict. (Indeed, the historical recurrence of student rebellion was the basis of Feuer's lengthy (1969) book, *The Conflict of Generations*). But, he argues, 'contemporary student movements evince also some new features', of which two are outstanding (Eisenstadt 1971, p. 69).

First, 'probably for the first time in history at least some parts of these movements tend to become entirely dissociated from broader social or national movements and from the adult world, and tend not to accept any adult models or associations – thus stressing intergenerational discontinuity and conflict to an unprecedented extent'. Second, 'many of these movements tend also to combine their political activities with violence and a destructive orientation which go much beyond the anarchist or bohemian traditions of youth or the artistic, intellectual subcultures, combining these with a very far-reaching, general, and widespread alienation from the existing social order'. He argues, thus:

[A]t least part of the explanation of these new features of youth rebellion and student protest lies in the convergence and mutual reinforcement of the two major sets of conditions or processes – namely, of widespread intellectual antinomianism on the one hand, and of generational discontinuity and conflict on the other, and of their simultaneous extension to the central zones of society as well as to very broad groups and strata. (Eisenstadt 1971, p. 69)

It is significant, writes Eisenstadt, that 'this type of protest is not borne only by small, closed intellectual groups but by widespread circles of novices and aspirants to intellectual status'. It is also significant that many of the ideas expressed by the student

protestors are ‘often shared and emphasized by many of the faculty itself’, which ‘evinces here some of the guilt feelings... of the parent generation in general and of the intellectuals among them in particular’. He contends:

It is perhaps in the attack on the university that the new dimension of protest – the negation of the premises of modernity, the emphasis on the meaninglessness of the existing centers, and the symbols of collective identity – becomes articulated in the most extreme, although certainly not necessarily representative, way.

It is also here that the basic themes of youth rebellion become very strongly connected with those of intellectual antinomianism. It is here that the rebellion against authority, hierarchy, and organizational framework, directed by the dreams of plenitude and of permissive, unstructured creativity, tends to become prominent – especially as the university serves also as the institutional meeting point between the educational and the central cultural spheres of the society. (Eisenstadt 1971, pp. 77-78).

Eisenstadt’s analysis brings together the degree of alienation, even nihilism, that was perceived within the student protest movement at that time, with an explanation of why it achieved a wider impact. This partly lies in an understanding of youth culture itself: as Abrams (1970) suggests, where the university brings together large groups of people who are primarily connected as an age cohort, in a context where they view their problems in terms of being ‘victimised’ by their elders because of their youth status (see Friedenberg 1969), this provides an environment that can nurture dissent and solidarity on age grounds. However, as Eisenstadt indicates, it is the wider crisis of meaning and authority – shared by the university elders and outside the campus bounds – that provide the substance to such dissent, and give it wider purchase.

Bell’s (1972) analysis of the impact of the ‘adversary culture’ similarly indicates the extent to which the impact of the events of the Sixties were underwritten by a profound unease with traditional norms, values and institutions, and Furedi’s (2013, 2014) writing on this period emphasises the degree to which authority was explicitly held in question. In this time of uncertainty and flux, the youthful student protest movement provided a clear vehicle for the ‘de-authorization’ of older

generations (Feuer 1969) and the traditions and institutions with which they were associated.

### 6.3 From the Sixties to the Nineties

The relationship in question here – between generations and wider social forces – was central to Mannheim’s ‘Problem of Generations’. When looking at the way events of the Sixties came to be framed around the Baby Boomer generation, Mannheim’s elucidation of the concept of ‘generation units’, and his understanding of the role of intellectuals in defining the *Zeitgeist*, seem to hold particular salience. However, for Mannheim, the wider social forces that shaped generations centrally included class, which in turn existed in a dynamic relationship with social change. By the 1960s, a widespread sensibility of the exhaustion of class politics laid the ground for the rise of status politics and, related to that, a self-conscious ‘politics of age’, alongside what the British historian Christopher Booker (1992 [1969]) has described as a cult of ‘classlessness’. From the ‘New Left’ politics associated with Herbert Marcuse and his followers in the student protest movement, to the affluent self-obsession humorously eviscerated by Tom Wolfe (1976) in his influential article on ‘The Me Decade’, the image of the Sixties – then, as now – was as a break with both collectivist class politics, and a ““revolt” against ‘stuffy’, ‘old-fashioned’, ‘bourgeois convention’” (Booker 1992, p. 20).

The ambivalence with which this change was perceived accounts, in part, for the heightened interest in the Baby Boomer generation as its perceived agents. In the wake of the heady Sixties, during the ‘prolonged “morning after”’ of the Seventies (Booker 1980, p. 7) and the ‘decade of nightmares’ that, according to Jenkins (2006), best describes the Eighties, there were significant attempts to question the social and cultural changes wrought by the Sixties. These were most notable through the ‘Culture Wars’ of the 1980s, where trends such as liberalism, relativism, postmodernism and permissiveness were roundly attacked, even as they became more influential.

Through its focus on education, the Culture Wars was, to a certain extent, fought on generational grounds. Allan Bloom’s influential critique of cultural relativism, *The Closing of the American Mind*, is ‘written from the perspective of a

teacher' (Bloom 1987, p. 19) and dedicated to his students. Bloom's concern about the ignorance and 'intellectually slack' character of 'the students who have succeeded that generation of the last fifties and early sixties, when the culture leeches, professional and amateur, began their great spiritual bleeding' (Bloom 1987, p. 51) situates the problem of cultural relativism within an historical period, but perpetuated down the generations.

In the British cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem, arguably the most memorable aspect of the Culture Wars is that described by the playwright David Edgar (1986), in an essay for the *Guardian* on 'the Conservative Party's assault on the legacy of the 1960's'. Edgar describes the battle waged by the then Conservative government against 'social workers and teachers, who are seen as transmitters of the legacy of permissiveness (and the language of unearned rights) to the incapable and the immature', and cites Colin Welch, writing in the *Spectator*: 'The revolting students of the 1960s are the revolting teachers of today, reproducing themselves by teaching as received wisdom what they furiously asserted against the wisdom received from their own teachers' (cited in Edgar 1986). However, it is worth stressing that at this time the Baby Boomers *as a generation* were not held responsible for the 'great spiritual bleeding' of the post-Sixties moment. More squarely in the frame was, as Edgar explains, an alleged "'new class" of government employees (in alliance with liberal opinion-formers)' who were accused by 'a circle of New York "neo-conservative" intellectuals' of using 'students and blacks... as foot soldiers in a campaign... to increase its power and influence at the expense of American business'.

Edgar's shorthand account of 'new class' theory is overly simplistic and conspiratorial. The late 1970s debate on 'The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class' (Gouldner 1979) was in fact an interesting attempt to grapple with the appearance of a new kind of 'educated elite' (Bruce-Briggs 1979) in American society, which appeared to provide a cultural and bureaucratic challenge to both traditional institutions and business interests. Nonetheless, as we see when analysing the coverage of the Clinton election, an uneasy fascination with this new elite reverberates throughout the discussion of the Baby Boomer generation, both in the academic literature and the mainstream press.

By the early 1990s, Clinton's rise to power was seen as emblematic of the extent to which the Culture Wars had been rendered passé, the Sixties had been 'mainstreamed' (Jenkins 2006), and the new political and cultural elite was notably different to those that had gone before, both in terms of its political and cultural orientation, and the source of its authority. Noting that 'the consequences of what happened in the Sixties were long-lasting: the Sixties cultural revolution in effect established the enduring cultural values and social behaviour for the rest of the century', Marwick expresses the balance of the Sixties legacy thus: '[T]here has been nothing quite like it; nothing would ever be quite the same again' (Marwick 1999, p. 806).

One effect of the Clinton election was to frame this shift in generational terms – thereby bringing into mainstream discourse and understanding the idea that the 'Baby Boomers' were synonymous with 'The Sixties'. Another effect, through the coverage of this election in the British media, was to construct a script through which this generational discourse would become diffused to Britain.

#### **6.4 The Clinton election: Baby Boomers rule the world**

I have stressed that the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem is far from stable. This is particularly clear in the material explored in this chapter. While, by around 2006, the script was beginning to harden into a consensus of negativity around the Boomers, material from the previous decade in particular reveals a sense of excitement and opportunity about the possibility that this generation was now 'coming of age' for the second time.

In initial research into the amount of media coverage discussing the Baby Boomers, I found that the first clear 'spike' in articles using the phrase 'Baby Boomer' published in the London *Times* was in the years 1992-3. On investigating this dataset, it became apparent that the increase was accounted for by a keen interest in the US Presidential candidate Bill Clinton, who in 1993 became America's first 'Baby Boomer' president. Of 206 articles in the dataset gathered from the four national newspapers over 1992-3, I analysed 83 in depth; of these, the majority related to the



Clinton election (indeed, the reason for using this relatively large sample was to make sure some articles were included that were *not* about Clinton). Many of these articles were written about the American situation, often by correspondents reporting from Washington, DC; but a number self-consciously related events there to the British situation, both in political and generational terms. For this reason, I have identified the Clinton election as a key moment in the diffusion of the Baby Boomer problem from the USA to the UK.

In describing how the narrative of the Baby Boomers as a cultural problem unfolds, I begin with a detailed analysis of a leading article in the *Guardian* newspaper, published in November 1992, which synthesises a number of themes that emerge from the 1992-3 dataset. The coverage of Clinton's election in turn reveals a number of deeper trends that lie beneath the cultural script of the Baby Boomers. These can be summarised as:

- The political sea-change that took place with the end of the Cold War, and the shift beyond the politics of left and right to a new politics of the 'Third Way' (Furedi 1995; Giddens 1994, 1999);
- The rise of a new political and cultural elite, associated with the ideas of the radical 'New Left', the emergence of a 'New Class' (Bruce-Briggs 1979; Gouldner 1979), and the institutionalisation of an 'adversary culture' (Bell 1972), along with the existence of a sizeable (and therefore powerful) voting bloc in the form of the Baby Boomer cohort;
- Significant changes at the level of sexual equality and the family, related to a transformation in society's attitudes towards sex and associated forms of 'personal liberation';
- The formation of a new kind of 'character type', informed by a therapeutic orientation towards the self (Lasch 1979; Wolfe 1976), and a self-actualising approach to work and public life. This character type is seen to stand in marked contrast to the alienated, apathetic 'organisation man' (Goodman 1970 [1960]; Whyte 1956) of the 1950s.

#### **6.4.1 A generational election**

A leading article in the *Guardian* on 7 November 1992, titled ‘The Baby Boomers come of age’, encapsulates the sense in which Bill Clinton’s presidential victory was perceived as a key generational shift, which also had meaning for Britain. ‘Until this week, until the election of Bill Clinton as President of the United States, the sixties generation promised only to disappoint on the playing field of politics’, the editorial begins, continuing:

No other generation had, in its youth, wrought such a profound change on the cultural landscape of the western world. Sheer numbers had much to do with the achievements: in 1968 there were 25 per cent more men and women in their twenties than 10 years later. But the sixties generation also proved remarkably radical and innovative. This was the generation that gave sudden birth to the first serious critique of the post-war welfare society – to gender politics, to personal politics, to environmental politics, and to generational politics as well. (*Guardian* 1992)

A number of statements are made in this paragraph. The Baby Boomers are discussed as the ‘sixties generation’, immediately indicating that the focus of the argument is a particular segment of the ‘Baby Boomer’ cohort (those born immediately after the Second World War, rather than the later demographic ‘bulge’ born in the early 1960s), and a particular ‘generation unit’: those associated with the radical politics of the student rebellion and the counterculture. The article is also clearly talking about ‘the sixties generation’ in terms of the historical period in which the Baby Boomers came of age (‘in their twenties’) than the period in which they were born, which implicitly follows the generational consciousness approach pioneered by Mannheim and favoured by contemporary theorists such as Edmunds and Turner (2002a, 2002b, 2005).

The presentation of the Clinton election as heralding ‘generational change’, with Clinton personifying the countercultural generation unit that in turn typifies the Baby Boomer generation, is shared by different newspapers in this dataset. For example, an article in the *Times* by Ben Macintyre, headlined ‘Woodstock in Washington’, begins:

The times they are a' changin', again. This year is the 25th anniversary of the founding of Rolling Stone magazine, the American bible of the hip generation; it is also the year when two baby-boomers, Bill Clinton and Al Gore, came to power. There is more than mere coincidence to this, for the baby-boomers' coming of age is being proclaimed everywhere, George Bush is gloomily handing over the office of president to a man young enough to be his son and a sticky wave of Sixties nostalgia is sweeping the nation. (Macintyre 1992)

Eight months previously, *Times* editor Peter Stothard wrote a perceptive article under a similar title to the *Guardian* editorial: 'Babyboomers coming of age'. 'New Yorkers divide themselves into generations almost as readily as into income groups', he wrote. 'Just one school of contemporary age-speak has given us the "lost generation", the "GI", the "silent" and the "boomer" generations.' Stothard continues:

When they look at their own presidential primary on April 7, the G-factor is high fashion.

Bill Clinton (b. 1946) is touchingly proud of being the first baby-boomer candidate for the White House. He wants 'generational change' and the election of the first president of the 21st century: himself. Patrick Buchanan (b.1938) calls for the generation of George Bush (b.1924) to give way to what else? the 'Buchanan generation'. Even though he has given up the race, Paul Tsongas (b.1941) is still going on about 'generational responsibilities'. (Stothard 1992, *Times*)

From the articles in the 1992-3 dataset, it is clear both that the Clinton election is perceived – and conducted – in self-consciously generational terms, and that the Baby Boomer generation is seen as 'the Sixties generation', with all that this connotes. The British newspapers express slightly different attitudes to whether a Clinton victory would be a positive event: this presumably reflects their differential political orientations, but again, it is often expressed in the language of generation. Thus, while the *Guardian* editorial lauds 'the sixties generation' as 'remarkably radical and innovative', yet which has taken a long time to make an impact on 'the playing field of politics', Stothard sees the 1992 election as 'a high-stakes battle of symbols' in which

the generation question acts as a substitute for policy alternatives, and the Boomers' victory would represent a premature passing of the generational baton.

The *Guardian* editorial goes on to discuss the apparent lack of impact by individual Baby Boomers upon contemporary political life, clearly linking the discussion to Britain. Here, the 'emblematic' features of the sixties generation are clearly posed in terms of student politics, and as going beyond the traditional left:

And yet it has been difficult, until now, to think of a single political figure who could be described as quintessentially a product of that decade and who has, at the same time, had any serious impact on the political scene in the United Kingdom or the United States; or indeed in most west European countries, where far greyer heads linger interminably on. Of course, successful politicians in their forties are not totally unknown or unfamiliar. John Major at 49 and Neil Kinnock at 50 are two easy examples. But neither, though growing up in the sixties, could possibly be described as emblematic of their generation.

(*Guardian* 1992)

Again, we have a clear indication that the Baby Boomers are seen to be personified by a particular 'generation unit' – of which political leaders of similar ages to Clinton are not 'emblematic'. This question, of who 'counts' as a Baby Boomer politician, reverberates throughout the datasets. In recent years, it has become particularly stark in the contrast between Tony Blair, born in 1953 (who very clearly was a Boomer politician, widely seen as the British version of Bill Clinton), and Clinton's successor George W. Bush, whose birthdate (1946) is the same year as Clinton, but whose character and politics mark him out as 'untypical'. Thus, Oliver Burkeman, writing in 2006, says of Bush:

He is hardly an archetypal baby boomer. He wasn't at Woodstock – he was too busy helping his father campaign for the Senate in Texas – and he certainly didn't march against the Vietnam war, although exactly what he was doing at the time remains a matter of some intrigue.

While others dreamed of world peace he dreamed of running a successful oil business. (Both dreams failed miserably.) Judging from his own

admissions, he was too drunk too often to have paid much attention to the cultural earthquake his generation was triggering. (Burkeman 2006, *Guardian*)

In a similar vein Tom Baldwin, writing in 2007, draws a contrast between the different 'sides' of the Boomer generation:

[Hillary Clinton] is, after all, one half of a couple who represent much of what disgusts conservatives about the Sixties. The bearded sexually charged Bill escapes Vietnam to study in Oxford where he 'did not inhale' and then marries Hillary, an earnest feminist with big glasses. They name their only child after a Joni Mitchell song, Bill gets oral sex in the Oval Office, while his gender revolutionary wife transforms the cookie recipe role of First Lady into a political power base. And now the pair of them are intent on hoodwinking God-fearing Americans into electing them. Again.

President Bush, who also avoided service in Vietnam, represents the reactionary wing of the same generation. His own hard-drinking phase ended when he found Jesus and saw off a challenge from that liberal elitist John Kerry amid smears on the Democratic candidate's own Vietnam war record. (Baldwin 2007, *Times*)

The presentation of the Baby Boomers through one particular 'generation unit' is made even more stark in the way that this generation unit, in turn, is perceived to be personified by Bill Clinton. We can see this in Baldwin's (1992) article, cited above, and elaborated in the *Guardian* editorial:

But, with the election this week of Mr Clinton to the most important political position in the world, the sixties generation has finally made it. For Bill Clinton is nothing if not a product of the sixties, just as John Major patently is not. Clinton demonstrated against the Vietnam war, the first commandment of that generation. He (tentatively) experimented with marijuana. He likes – and plays – pop music. He looks 46 going on 36, not 46 going on 56: perhaps the true test of sixties person. And the election campaign marked the political coming-of-age of the sixties. Despite the best efforts of George Bush, patriotism is no longer to be equated with having fought in the second world war: and it does

not preclude demonstrating against one's country's involvement in Vietnam, a charge to which the electorate now merely shrugs. Despite attempts to tar the Clinton camp as the 'spotted owl crowd' and the 'ozone kids', environmental activism is a legitimate qualification for the highest office. While the efforts to brand the new First Lady as a 'feminazi' clearly failed, Hillary Clinton is a potent symbol of the feminist generation: professional woman, public woman, mother – and recognised as probably more intelligent than her husband. In every way and dimension, Bill Clinton's election marks the political legitimation of the cultural advances ushered in by the sixties. (*Guardian* 1992)

There are some tentative attempts to question the extent to which Clinton is typical of even members of his own generation unit, let alone the entire generation. American writer Mickey Kaus (1992), writing in the *Guardian* about Clinton as a presidential hopeful, begins by stating his intention to vote for Clinton because he will be a better president than his opponents ('On the issues, he'll more than "do" – he's almost a neo-liberal's dream'). Yet he goes on to voice his reservations:

Part of this is generational. Clinton, we're constantly reminded, would be the first baby-boomer in the White House. Why him? I mean, we marched, we took drugs, we dodged tear gas – and this is our contribution, this non-inhaling, student-body president? (Kaus 1992, *Guardian*).

However, it is also noteworthy that when the Baby Boomer generation *as a whole* is presented as a problem, the differences between generation units appear to be flattened out. Thus Burkeman (2006) writes that the sixtieth birthday of both the current President, George W Bush, and his predecessor Bill Clinton, represents 'the defining experience of boomers in the next few years', and 'has prompted an outbreak of reflection on the ageing of the baby-boom generation'. In her blistering critique of the 'boomers who busted us', Vine (2008) discusses the forthcoming US election:

After the excesses, sexual, bellicose and otherwise, of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, the American people have finally decided to skip a generation – that generation. Born in 1941, John McCain is an austerity baby, with all the attendant characteristics. Barack Obama is a classic Generation X-er: hard-

grafting, grave, responsible – and almost pathologically incapable of the kind of behaviour favoured by the last Democratic President. (Vine 2008, *Times*)

As noted in Chapter 5, in the context of a global economic crisis that happened on the watch of the Bush administration and the New Labour government, Boomer affluence, recklessness and greed has come to be framed as a cause – with the generational location of Bush and Blair, and the people who vote for them, appearing to provide an explanation. The irony in Vine’s account, of course, is that according to the ‘long’ definition of the Baby Boomer generation favoured by some of their most influential critics, Barack Obama – born in 1961 – is also a Boomer.

#### **6.4.2 Diffusion to Britain**

While a number of articles published around the time of the Clinton election emphasise the similarities between the political challenges of the US and UK, some draw attention to the differences. Andrew Moncur (1993) muses on the difference between himself and Bill Clinton, drawing attention to the differences between members of the same generation, and also between the experience of Britain and America. He comments wryly on ‘the flood of commentaries telling us, with immense authority, about baby-boomers and the influences which shaped the Clinton generation’, and states: ‘Frankly, I barely recognise any of them. I suppose we lived through the same global events but in different worlds’ (Moncur 1993, *Guardian*).

However, the way that the Clinton election most clearly provides a vehicle for the diffusion of the Baby Boomer frame to Britain is through a discussion of political actors and outlooks. A substantial article by Labour strategist Philip Gould, co-ordinator of Labour’s Shadow Communications Agency in the 1992 election, ‘reflects on the lessons for John Smith from the successful conduct of the Clinton campaign’ having spent the previous four weeks advising the Clinton-Gore campaign in Little Rock, Arkansas. ‘With Clinton’s lead sliding, and “tax and trust” on the lips of many voters, it appeared likely that the US electorate would rather cling to the damaged security of the last second world war president than risk the first genuine baby boomer candidate, who opposed the Vietnam war, missed the draft and jogs in Rolling Stones T-shirts,’ writes Gould. But when it came to the election:

America's nerve held. The tax and trust message, borrowed so assiduously from Conservative Party Central Office and promulgated by numerous visits by Central Office officials to Bush's campaign headquarters, failed to take root. Why? Why did hope prevail over fear in the United States, but not in Britain? (Gould 1992, *Guardian*)

Gould goes on to explain how the credit for Clinton's victory should go to Clinton himself and those around him, who 'created a fusion of message, strategy, tactics and political leadership that has not occurred before in our political generation'. He concludes the article with a statement that, in the later Tony Blair years, would be revealed as rather inaccurate: 'Some aspects of US campaigning, however, do not travel. I think it unlikely that we will see John Smith jogging in a Rolling Stones T-shirt or playing a saxophone at 2.00 am with wrap-around sunglasses. Even with a rock'n'roll president there are limits' (Gould 1992, *Guardian*).

John Smith (b. 1938), the Labour Party leader at time of the Clinton election who died suddenly in 1994, was clearly seen as a very different personality to Clinton, with a significantly different generational location. Following Tony Blair's victory in the British general election of 1997, the cultural script of the Clinton election was quickly and easily adopted to fit Blair, the more quintessential Baby Boomer, with his student rock band and successful barrister wife. Fairclough's (2000) analysis of 'the rhetorical style of Tony Blair' encapsulates well the perceived similarities between the style of Clinton and Blair:

The sort of 'normal person' that Blair comes across as is crucial in defining his leadership style, and to his popularity. Gould's list of strengths<sup>14</sup> is worth taking seriously. 'Freshness and a sense of change': Blair belongs to a different generation from that of previous political leaders, and he is an extremely young leader – he became Prime Minister just before his 44<sup>th</sup> birthday. In both respects he is strikingly similar to Bill Clinton, who is just seven years older than he is. Both belong to the generation that grew up in the 1960s and early

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<sup>14</sup> In Gould, P. (1998) *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party*. London: Little Brown and Co.



1970s, and both are (in Gould's words) 'a new kind of politician'. Part of that generation's experience is a discomfort with traditional forms of publicness, including traditional forms of political charisma and rhetoric – be it in the mode of Churchill or of the previous Labour leader Michael Foot – and a corresponding preference for forms of publicness which are personally open and reveal people's 'normality' rather than disguising it behind a public façade. These new forms of publicness transcend social domains: for instance, there is a striking similarity between the style of Blair and the style of the prominent and successful businessman, Richard Branson. (Fairclough 2000, p. 98)

However, as I discuss below, the focus on the personality and generational similarities between Clinton and Blair became a way of discussing the more profound and substantial similarities between the centrist 'Third Way' politics pioneered by Clinton's Democrats and then adopted by the New Labour government.

### **6.4.3 The radicals in charge**

Having indicated that the Baby Boomer generation is personified in a particular generation unit, and that the political figure of Clinton provides a model for British politicians, the *Guardian's* 1992 editorial goes on to describe 'the cultural changes to which the sixties gave rise', which 'have transformed the lifestyle of our societies and proved remarkably resilient to all attempts to reverse them':

Attitudes towards race, gender, sexuality, the environment, abortion and censorship have all been transformed over the last quarter-century; in each case the transforming moment lay in the sixties. One of the *causes célèbres* of the radical Right in the eighties – as important as the totem polls of the welfare state and Keynesianism – was 'the sixties' and all that word stood for. And yet the area in which the radical Right was least successful was its social authoritarianism, its attempt to roll back the social and cultural gains of the sixties. What made the latter relatively impregnable was that they were going with the grain of social change. (*Guardian* 1992)

This paragraph relates to the symbolic significance of the Baby Boomer generation as a cultural problem. Here, the discussion is less about a generation than a particular (indeed, peculiar) historical moment, in which the norms, customs, laws and institutions of post-war society all seemed to be held in question. The *Guardian* alludes to an important point in claiming that this questioning of moral and legal norms, and the cultural and institutional ‘transformations’ that resulted, have – in 1992 – withstood a number of challenges from the political right, most clearly expressed in the ‘culture wars’ of the 1980s. Furthermore, the editorial claims that the ‘relatively impregnable’ character of the cultural changes wrought by the sixties testifies to the extent to which they supported the was due to is indicates that the ‘social and cultural gains of the sixties’ were not an expression of *anomie*, as they were often perceived at the time, but rather that they were ‘going with the grain of social change’.

I discuss elsewhere in this thesis what the Sixties has meant to the present-day imagination, and the extent to which attitudes towards the social and cultural changes wrought by this period have undergone a subtle, but decisive, shift in the past few years. Here, I mainly wish to note the extent to which the Clinton election was seen, not only in generational terms, as the Baby Boomers taking power, but also as a key *historical* moment, in the extent to which it represented the institutionalisation of the legacy of the Sixties. In this regard, the particular generation unit within the Baby Boomer cohort that is seen to typify the ideas of the Sixties, which is in turn personified by the ‘sexually charged’, draft-dodging, non-inhaling, feminist-marrying Bill Clinton (Baldwin 2007, *Times*), is perceived as the key actor responsible for mainstreaming the Sixties legacy in the context of the 1990s.

The extent to which ‘[i]n every way and dimension, Bill Clinton’s election marks the political legitimisation of the cultural advances ushered in by the sixties’ (*Guardian* 1992) emerges as a rather troubled phenomenon. While there is a clear political difference in the positive way that the *Guardian*, a left-leaning paper, greets the emergence of the radical new Clintonite elite and the more circumspect approach taken by the right-leaning *Times* and *Mail*, both sides share a narrative about the unusual character of this new elite: in particular, the distinct challenges posed to a generation that self-consciously stood for the cause of anti-authority when it is itself in a position of authority.

The problem is posed partly in terms of the Baby Boomers' age – although, as noted above, a number of contradictory statements are often aired at the same time, to do with whether the Boomers are too young for power; whether they have waited too long to seek power; whether this generation is infantile and irresponsible or precocious. Thus, noting again that 'the political generation spawned by the sixties has, until now, been a miserable failure', the *Guardian* suggests that it could be argued that one possible reason for this is that 'it is still too early, that the potential players are still too young. And there would be some truth in this, especially for a generation that never wanted to grow old' (*Guardian* 1992).

However, the editorial continues:

But the reasons are surely deeper than that. The sixties generation was, above all, one of critique and opposition. It was a rebellion against 1945, against the long boom, consumer society, social and moral conservatism, and the Vietnam war. It may have defined new cultural mores, but it failed to define a new political agenda. It came from the Left, and saw itself as being vaguely on the Left, but its rebellion was fundamentally against the Left and its achievements, against the edifices of post-war social democracy. The sixties generation laid siege to both the Labour Party and the Democratic Party. It felt scant rapport with the post-war Left; and yet it had nowhere else to go. It was a generation which came to live in a political diaspora. That may be why so many of the scions of that generation, on both sides of the Atlantic, chose to go into the media, or the public services, or the arts and entertainment, rather than politics. In this country, there are a lot more of them, relatively speaking, in the BBC or the broadsheet newspapers than you will ever find on the Labour benches. (*Guardian* 1992)

A number of points are made here, which seem to reflect directly some of the anxieties aired in the academic literature of the late 1960s and early 1970s. One is the institutionalisation of an adversary culture (Bell 1972), bred in part through the inculcation of radical ideas into the new elite via the university (Abrams 1970, Eisenstadt 1971), and institutionalised through a 'New Class' of professionals and

bureaucrats, whose influence on cultural channels and institutions held particular sway (Bruce-Briggs 1979; Gouldner 1979). By the early 1990s, this group had become both middle-aged, and in charge of the mainstream, which arguably gave greater urgency to the problem. As well as achieving political power (through the Clinton election, and later the election of Blair's New Labour in 1997), the influence of the counter-culture spread through wider social and cultural institutions – in particular, education and the media – which in turn shaped the kind of pressures and influences that engaged the political elite. This was compounded, for the *Guardian*, by the political nomadism of the counter-culture: it was of the left, but uncomfortable with organised, collectivist Socialism. The result was an uncertainty about the kind of politics that the 'Sixties generation' would formulate while in power.

Anxiety about the consequences of having radicals rule the world was also aired by the right-leaning press. In January 1993, the *Mail on Sunday* carried a lengthy analysis by Paul Palmer, headlined 'The day-glo baby chair brigade hits town: Clinton's earnest protégés in their early 30s, laden down with politically correct reports, plot a new era in Washington'. The article began by emphasising the new political elite's youth and their studied difference from the older era, expressed in terms of fashion, ideas, and forms of self-presentation. 'By nature, this new elite are worriers; they worry about the ozone layer; they moan about urban decay; they fret about lesbian one-parent families, and champion the cause of social welfare,' Palmer wrote, before getting to the heart of the Baby Boomers' anxiety (and the generalised anxiety about the Baby Boomers taking political power):

But most of all right now, they worry about whether all this worrying will actually make Clinton's administration a success. For nearly two decades they have marched, petitioned, fought elections and held seminars in a vain attempt to unseat the Republican establishment in the White House.

Now it's their turn to rule... but what, you might wonder, do you do as a sequel to 12 years of protest? (Palmer 1993, *Mail on Sunday*)

Here, Palmer introduces the problem of a generation running society that has been known for its youthful radicalism, and the question of how that squares with responsibility and authority: "The one thing we do know is that our

mummies and daddies will not be there to pick up the pieces,” says one Democratic staffer. “As we say here: we’re flying solo now.” Palmer goes on to state that ‘[t]he Old Guard in Washington, even among the Democrats, is deeply unsure how to handle the eager, opinionated young activists it now finds in its midst. They are stepping off the Greyhound bus in droves – immediately launching themselves into the battle to change America’, and quotes 26-year-old Bob Field, ‘a Democratic worker on Capitol Hill’: ‘The old stooges are gone forever... We are a new broom. The generation that was ruled by its fathers now holds the reins’ (Palmer 1993, *Mail on Sunday*).

There are, however, indications that in the early months of the Clinton presidency, the generational transition was by no means straightforward. ‘A few weeks ago Bill Clinton was a tottering disaster, almost an international laughing-stock,’ wrote Martin Walker in July 1993. ‘Things were looking so bad that even the men Clinton beat were feeling sorry for him. Marlin Fitzwater, Bush’s spokesman and press secretary, was shaking his head at the teenage yuppies around Clinton and warning publicly that “what they need is a few old, bald, fat guys in the White House. We reassure people”’. Clinton hired David Gergen, ‘veteran spin-doctor’ and ‘Ronald Reagan’s master media manipulator’, who came ‘into the White House that was being dubbed “Home Alone”’ (Walker 1993b, *Guardian*).

#### **6.4.5 Convergence: ‘Mush-ism’, the Third Way, and demography**

The dataset of articles from around the Clinton election – whether from left-leaning or right-leaning newspapers – give the impression that the Baby Boomer politicians personified by Clinton adopted a pragmatic, centrist form of politics, made up of elements from the left, right, and counterculture. The ‘Third Way’ approach is seen to speak to a combination of social idealism, personal self-obsession and the desire to maintain their own levels of material comfort, and both proves palatable to, and is shaped by, the large demographic force made up by members of the Baby Boomer cohort (widely defined), who were largely not student radicals. ‘This is a culture that is intensely liberal on social issues like welfare,’ said former Democratic worker Alison McCoy, when the Clinton administration took office, ‘but immensely conservative

when it comes to their own lives. They are the “have my cake and eat it” generation’ (Palmer 1993, *Mail on Sunday*).

The *Guardian*’s 1992 editorial elaborates the point that Clinton’s election marks a *departure* from both the ideals associated with the sixties and those associated with traditional politics. ‘The sixties generation never felt at one with the Left because it belonged to – and was the bearer of – a new culture, which in the sixties was still confined to a minority,’ it argues. ‘The irony was that when this individual, opportunity-based culture became a mass phenomenon, it was the Right rather than the Left which was to understand it best. That, in country after country, was the basic political meaning of the eighties.’ Clinton, ‘in this context, is not simply an authentic cultural product of the sixties generation: he also represents a new kind of left-of-centre politics’:

For ‘Clintonism’ is no simple return to the old principles of social democracy. It is true that his commitment to public works, a more active state and helping the less fortunate are old themes. But his emphasis on a small, more efficient state, people-based economics, and workfare as opposed to welfare dependency, marks a sharp break with orthodox canons of social democracy. That is why it is wrong simply to portray him as a rejection of the eighties and a return to the sixties. More accurately, he represents a part-critique, part-acceptance of both the sixties and the eighties. He is, in that sense, a creature of our times, the first post-eighties centre-left leader. (*Guardian* 1992)

Will Hutton’s *Observer* essay (2010), discussed in Chapter 4, indicates the extent to which the economic liberalism associated with the Reagan-Thatcher era gradually came to merge with discomfort with the personal liberalism associated with the Sixties, against the backdrop of the exhaustion of traditional moral codes and institutions. The consequence has been a search for a new form of social conformity, which relied upon a questioning of both the institutions and norms of the past, and the liberationist impulse of the Sixties. Here, it is worth noting that even back in 1993, this (albeit contradictory) process of convergence was recognised, and associated it with demographic factors – specifically, the generational location of the Baby Boomers.

An interesting discussion by Toby Young of Lawrence Kasdan's film *Grand Canyon* uses the Los Angeles riots of 1992 as a springboard to discuss his concept of 'Mush-ism' – a 'saccharine-coated social concern' that forges 'the common link between John Major and George Bush'. The film 'features a group of baby boomers agonising about the extent to which their lives fall short of their sixties ideals'; what is interesting about it, writes Young, 'is that its apparently liberal message has been pounced on by members of George Bush's re-election team as the central theme of his campaign' (Young 1992, *Guardian*).

For Young, the reason for the Bushites' interest in the film is the extent to which it intersects with 'a latent conservative streak in the "thirtysomething" genre'. He goes on to offer an explanation of what, in the context of present-day British politics, we might understand as the precursor to the socially conservative approach favoured by many elements of the current Conservative government. 'Mrs Thatcher said recently that there was no such thing as Majorism, but perhaps this saccharine-coated social concern is the common link between John Major and George Bush - Mush-ism', writes Young. He continues:

What makes *Grand Canyon* so appealing to conservatives is the voluntarist solution it proposes to the problems of urban regeneration. The way to tackle violent crime, drug addiction and homelessness, it says, is not to set up government task forces but to encourage individuals to 'Make A Difference'. Just as *thirtysomething* presented parenthood as the ultimate benchmark of emotional maturity, *Grand Canyon* urges the baby boomers to take on responsibility for others as a way of overcoming their anomie. To a moderate conservative like Bush the film offers a way of expressing his concern about social deprivation without proposing to raise taxes. (Young 1992, *Guardian*)

Young's article is interesting in that, unlike most of those in the 1992-3 dataset, it discusses a new political outlook as being associated with the 'generation unit' represented by the Right, rather than with Clinton's Democrats. Thus, while the apparent political transition is represented in generational terms, it is implicitly tied more to an historical ideological shift than to the conscious outlook of the Clintonite 'generation unit'.

Anatole Kaletsky (1993), writing in the *Times* under the headline ‘Yuppies are dead, long live Mambies’, provides a demographically-focused version of this argument. He begins by noting the apparently contradictory pressures facing governments in that era:

In the years ahead, governments will come under growing pressure to deal with unemployment, if necessary through the ‘left-wing’ policies of social welfare and demand management abandoned in the free market economic revolution of the 1980s. At the same time, there will be public clamour to restore social order, if necessary with some of the ‘right-wing’ policies on crime, education, censorship, sexual orientation and family structure abandoned in the libertarian social revolution of the last decade.

Governments that had become accustomed to shirking responsibility for the unemployed will be expected to ‘do something’ about economic growth and social safety nets. But voters will also tell them to instil discipline in schools, to favour nuclear families and to keep the streets safe by locking up criminals and throwing away the keys. (Kaletsky 1993, *Times*)

In pondering the source of this apparently contradictory demand, for ‘left-wing’ management of the economy and ‘right-wing’ measures to enforce law and order and ‘traditional’ morality, Kaletsky offers the answer of ‘demographics; specifically, the power of the vast generation of “baby boomers” born between 1946 and 1961’. ‘The 1980s were the Yuppie decade,’ he explains:

The baby boomers were in their twenties and thirties, predominantly single, aspiring to personal affluence and interested mainly in sensual gratification of every form. In economics it was the decade of right-wing laissez-faire individualism. But in social policy, it was the period when, despite the conservative rhetoric of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the erosion of traditional authority that started in the 1960s was gradually enshrined in law. (Kaletsky 1993, *Times*)



The demographic analysis offered by Kaletsky had a wider purchase in the idea that the Democrats had found a way to connect with the concerns and self-interest of the large number of individual voters who made up the Baby Boomer cohort. There is a paradox here, in that the equation of the Baby Boomers with a demographically small and culturally distinct 'generation unit' seems incompatible with the assertion that its power comes as a result of being a large, demographically significant voting bloc. These assertions or assumptions recur throughout the media construction of the Boomers as a cultural problem, where they adopt a fluid meaning. On one hand, the inherent radicalism of a sizeable Sixties generation is seen as an important reason for the success of a pot-smoking, draft-dodging Democrat in the Presidential elections; on the other hand, the need to satisfy the desires of a large 'Baby Boomer' voting bloc, many of whom are not radical, is posited as a reason for Clinton's studied 'Centrist' approach to the economy and welfare.

The *Daily Mail's* Dermot Purgavie (1992) claims that 'the Democrats' baby-boom ticket' was one of three factors that 'galvanised voters, reversing a 30-year decline in polling'. Writing in the *Guardian*, Walker (1992) cites the explanations given by Robert Shapiro, Clinton's economic adviser, for Clinton's lead in the election race. Shapiro 'is vice-president of the Progressive Policy Institute, the think-tank behind the Democratic Leadership Conference' which has 'developed a coherent policy menu to justify what is really a political response to demographic change'. The 'generational phenomenon' is a key element of this:

George Bush is certainly the last president to have fought in the second world war. He belongs to the generation which came to power with Kennedy in 1960, provided seven presidents, and still has 63 million members.

Then comes the 'silent generation' born like Mr Perot or Jerry Brown into the low birth rates of the Great Depression. They number only 49 million. Mr Clinton and Sen Gore (and Mr Quayle) are the newly-dominant Baby Boomers of the post-war years, 79 million of them, with little memory or deference for the old Democratic principles of the New Deal. (Purgavie 1992, *Daily Mail*)

That commentators from both left and right recognised the pragmatism that defined the new Clinton administration, and sought (or were sympathetic to) demographic explanations for this political shift, indicates some uneasy dynamics on both sides. For the left-leaning *Guardian*, it reveals a consciousness that the ‘Sixties generation’ is neither as radical as the mythology would pretend, nor as left-wing as previous ‘political’ generations.

For some commentators writing in the *Times* and the *Mail*, the emphasis on the pragmatic self-interest of Boomer politicians and those who vote for them reveals a desire to minimise the impact of the cultural and political turn that the Sixties represented, and the extent to which the Clinton election institutionalised these changes. The real meaning of the Clinton election, suggests Macintyre (1992), is the extent to which it feeds the vanity of Baby Boomer voters:

Canny Bill Clinton, of course, is more committed to the Sixties vote than Sixties ideas (while Jimmy Carter was memorising all of Bob Dylan's lyrics, young Bill was already busy policy-wonking fretting over issues), but that has not prevented many of his generation feeling vindicated by his election.  
(Macintyre 1992, *Times*)

In Kaletsky’s analysis of the ‘Mamby decade’, the common-sense assumption that people become less radical with age becomes a comfortable explanation for why the Boomers will be more conformist than is feared:

The conventional wisdom among politicians, even today, is that the Yuppie mix of economic conservatism and social libertarianism, will be the defining political philosophy of the next 50 years. But conventional wisdom forgets that Yuppies grow up. The politics of the next decade may be dominated by the people who elected Mrs Thatcher and President Reagan, but in their forties and fifties these people will have very different concerns. They will be more interested in schools, health, safe streets and the moral influences on their children, than in low taxes and unbridled free speech. The Yuppie decade, when Mrs Thatcher said ‘there is no such thing as society’, is over. In the 1990s the baby boomers will recognise society because they are Married and Middle-

aged with Babies. Perhaps it should be called the Mamby Decade.<sup>15</sup> (Kaletsky 1993, *Times*)

In the early Nineties, despite the general sentiment that the Clinton election as an opportunity for change, the notion of the voting power wielded by the Baby Boomer cohort was already being aired both as an apology for Clinton's pragmatism, and a denial that his 'Third Way' politics represented a decisive shift. The political dominance of the 'sixties generation' was perceived more as the next phase in the unfolding of an historical (and therefore generational) cycle. One effect of this was that some of the more significant transformations that this election brought to the fore were effectively downplayed.

#### **6.4.5 Sex, women and the family**

Arguably the most important impact of the Sixties was on attitudes to sex, women and the family. During the Clinton election, the magnitude of this cultural shift was rarely discussed explicitly; however, certain moments revealed both the institutionalisation of women's equality, and an ambivalence about it. For example, the coverage of Hillary Clinton focused self-consciously on her role as an inspirational feminist symbol. 'The buzz phrase this week among America's chattering classes is "power couple"', writes Kate Muir in 1993. 'Billary, as the presidential team is being snarkily titled, has provided a role model for the future, and put the official seal on the other power couples following in its wake.' In terms of the kind of power couple that 'Billary' is seen to typify, Muir quotes Dr Ross Goldstein, 'the psychologist who runs Generation Insights, which advises advertisers and manufacturers on coming trends':

'Baby boomers and the generation following them have had to learn to compete with their partners in a new arena,' Mrs Goldstein says. 'Before, home and work could be compartmentalised, but now they have to manage competition in the context of a loving relationship.' (Muir 1993, *Times*)

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<sup>15</sup> Its worth noting that the question of whether those who have radical ideas in their youth become more conservative with age was a lively theme in the academic literature post-1968, and attempts to find an empirical answer to the question of the 'maturation' effects of political alienation or voting behaviour were generally equivocal (see discussion in Spitzer 1973).

An article by Susan Reimer in the *Guardian* in 1993, reproduced from the *Baltimore Sun*, fairly gushes: 'Hillary Rodham Clinton is a peer to us baby boomers. And she is what we infant feminists were promised 25 years ago – that in our lifetime we would share the power'. Reimer goes on to elucidate the 'having it all' idea that enjoyed some popularity in the 1990s:

Hillary transcends politics for me. I swear I would like her if she were married to Pat Buchanan. She is brilliant and vulnerable, warm and steel-spined, she is a mom, but she has another calling and it is filled with the social justice so familiar to those of us who came of age in the 1960s. (Reimer 1993, *Guardian*)

Both Muir and Reimer positively appreciate the magnitude of the shift that has taken place in women's equality, experienced first and most starkly by (professional) Baby Boomers. However, they also express a certain ambivalence about 'power couples' in the political domain. 'It is unfair of me to ask Hillary Rodham Clinton to be the fulfilment of my feminist aspirations, my 1960s politics, my ideals about marriage and partnership, and to share my worries as a mother,' writes Reimer. 'She is, after all, a politician and a government official, however ex officio, and I should be detached and circumspect.' Muir puts it more bluntly:

Perhaps political power should be put in a separate and more dangerous category than other his and hers jobs. For those keen on joining the movement, a word of warning: there is nothing worse than a couple who get carried away with their own importance. The fate of eastern Europe's first power couple, Nicolas and Elena Ceaucescu, should always be borne in mind. (Muir 1993, *Times*)

Indeed, the apparent problems of women's equality at the level of professional and political life were starkly revealed by the Zoe Baird affair of January 1993: which again, was treated as a typical Baby Boomer problem. A leading article in the *Guardian* in 1993 begins:

Is it social comedy – or social tragedy? In Washington, with massive fanfare, power shifts a generation. Men born since the second world war, the baby

boom generation, inherit the political earth. And within 24 hours there's disaster: a new, previously unthought-of Senate reason to reject a prospective candidate for Cabinet office. Ten years ago, the Senate would weed out appointees who had once smoked pot. Now the elected President admits to puffing, if not inhaling, it: so that's a truly busted offence. But Zoe E. Baird cannot be Attorney-General because she employed a couple of Peruvians, illegal immigrants, to look after her kids while she toiled. An archetypal baby-boomer issue. (*Guardian* 1993)

Yet for the *Guardian*, this story reveals not only the difficulties facing ambitious women wanting to hold public office, but an apparent parenting deficit within middle-class Baby Boomer couples. 'Somewhere in this dilemma there do need to be better, more formulated, more rigorous standards for child care at every level, with better pay for a service that is no longer some random, optional extra: rather the underpinning of a generation to come,' states the editorial, which is headlined 'What the Boomers do with baby'. 'But with it there surely needs to be a drastic re-ordering of priorities as well. Why do the middle class judge each other by the size of their patios or their limousines, and not by the support they provide for their children?'

A news article published by the *Guardian* on the same day as the editorial cited above presents the Zoe Baird affair as an allegory on the out-of-touch-ness of many in the Clinton administration. "'This is our time," Mr Clinton declared in his inaugural address, to announce the arrival in power of the baby-boomer generation,' writes Walker (1993a): 'But the baby-boomers are also the yuppie generation'. Zoe Baird and her husband 'are not the kind of "forgotten middle class" to whom the Clinton campaign appealed,' states Walker, but 'the overpaid yuppies and lawyers whom voters have come to resent'. The whole affair goes beyond a mere 'political blunder':

It throws up disturbing questions of arrogance inside the Clinton camp. It suggests that Clinton's yuppies are out of touch with the plight of millions of ordinary Americans juggling jobs and children with far less money. (Walker 1993a, *Guardian*)

From the standpoint of 2014, the apparent contradiction between the lauding of Hillary Clinton as a feminist icon, and the lack of sympathy for Zoe Baird's inability to manage her childcare dilemmas adequately, can be seen to prefigure the fraught 'work-life balance' debate that frames the narrative about working motherhood today (see Hays 1996, Lee *et al.* 2014). This in turn relates to a wider anxiety about the work-focused, self-oriented character type associated with the Baby Boomer generation, discussed below.

Five years after the Zoe Baird affair, the biggest problem facing Clinton's Baby Boomer administration was seen not as sexual equality, but as sex itself. An article by Damian Whitworth (1998) states that 'A year that began with a President facing a sexual harassment lawsuit has ended with the whole political world in the grip of a moral crisis'. Claiming that '[t]he origins of this sorry state may be traced back 30 years or more', Whitworth presents the Lewinsky affair very much as a Baby Boomer problem:

Bill Clinton, born shortly after the end of the Second World War, talks a lot about the baby-boomers and finding a way to be able to afford to look after them all when they retire in a decade or so. But even if he succeeds in creating a solution to that knotty problem, the presidency of the first baby-boomer in the White House will be remembered primarily for activity and attitudes born of the sexual revolution that his generation had spearheaded. (Whitworth 1998, *Times*)

Whitworth goes on to make some interesting observations regarding the clash of generation units that became apparent during Clinton's impeachment. 'When Mr Clinton went to Georgetown University in the late 1960s he was an energetic pursuer of women and went on to become a master of philandering,' Whitworth writes:

But while he was playing the saxophone and smoking – but not inhaling – marijuana, at another Washington university Kenneth Starr, a young man who went to his high school prom but did not dance because his Christian denomination disapproved of such frivolity, was busy swotting, unaffected by the social upheavals in the country around him. These two products of such

different 1960s worlds collided three decades later when the behaviour of the Cavalier was investigated by the Puritan. The reputations of smaller players caught in their drama are falling like dominos. (Whitworth 1998, *Times*)

The drama of the Lewinsky scandal and Clinton's impeachment illuminates the discomfort with which the 'sexual liberation' associated with the Sixties is received in the present day. On one hand, revelations of extra-marital affairs and casual sexual relationships are not as damaging as they may have been for previous generations of politicians: it should be remembered that Clinton ultimately survived the impeachment process. On the other hand, the nature of his relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky was received as troubling to many of the liberal or feminist left, because it seemed to indicate that the 'free love' associated with the Baby Boomers was ultimately exploitative.

However, arguably the most significant effect of the 'Billary' moment in the 1990s, and all that this is seen to represent, is that women fully enter the frame as players in the generation game. As indicated in Chapter 2, the history and sociology of generations has, up until recent decades, focused on men. It is the story of 'Fathers and Sons', whose conflict (and reconciliation) is symbolic of, and related to, cultural transmission and the shifts in public life. Women's role in the process of generational continuity has largely been tied to kinship and reproduction, rather than the wider conflicts of citizenship. But as sexual equality becomes a mainstream expectation in public life, and the sphere of reproduction becomes more directly politicised, women too become part 'the problem of generations' (see discussion in Edmunds and Turner 2002a, 2002b).

#### **6.4.6 A new character type**

In each element of the Clinton election discussed above, the notion that the Baby Boomers personify a new type of character is either explicitly or implicitly expressed. The Boomer character type is framed simultaneously as earnest, sexually gregarious, work-oriented, self-obsessed, and emotionally discursive. 'Americans now in their forties seem particularly prone to the misapprehension that they, and only they,

discovered that sex is fun, war is hell and wearing strange clothes bugs the heck out of adults,' writes Macintyre (1992). He continues:

For all its much-vaunted emotional angst, the Sixties was a time of economic plenty, and the adolescents who flocked to Woodstock and protested at Berkeley have gone on to high-paying jobs, raise families and buy bourgeois accoutrements just like the people they protested against. Each new generation does that, each feels compromised eventually, but only the children of the Sixties are still talking, endlessly, about their generation.

Then there are feelings: the urgent need to relate with lovers, friends or relatives to discuss why they are not communicating. When the Jennifer Flowers scandal broke (even her name has a Sixties ring to it) the Clintons' response, typical of their generation, was to go on television and talk about their marriage, their feelings, and let it all hang out... As the great American satirist Tom Lehrer once said, the kindest thing anyone can do if they cannot communicate is to SHUT UP. (Macintyre 1992, *Times*)

In the dataset of articles from 1992-3, the Boomers' self-obsession appears as a continual theme. However, it is tempered by an emphasis on the Clintonite elite's self-conscious commitment to causes. '[T]hey worry about the ozone layer; they moan about urban decay; they fret about lesbian one-parent families, and champion the cause of social welfare,' writes Palmer (1993, *Mail on Sunday*). Ian Brodie (1993) speculates about the forthcoming inauguration, which 'will be dignified, fun, folksy and different':

The Democrats will strive for political correctness. An invitation-only ball for the homeless, who are asked to wear 'church clothes', will be run by the Community for Creative Non-Violence. There are special events for gays and lesbians, environmentalists, abortion rights activists and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals who put on aprons saying 'I'd rather be naked than wear fur'. (Brodie 1993, *Times*)

In a similar vein, the hedonism associated with the Baby Boomers is tempered by an emphasis on the Clinton elite's earnest commitment to work. Writing about the



'renaissance weekend' attended by the Clintons and others in and around their circle shortly after the election, Jamie Dettmer (1992) notes that, in place of 'a well-deserved new year holiday', the Clintons 'will this week be found doing what they like best: "policy-wonking", or in other words discussing weighty national problems.' Their 'renaissance weekend' involves '500 other earnest baby-boomers, all well known in the professions, business, politics and sport', who will 'mark the new year with a five-day conference consisting of 221 seminars called programmes in which everything from famine in Africa to the intricacies of American health policy will be debated' (Dettmer 1992, *Times*). Martin Fletcher (1993, *Times*) notes that previous presidents have taken holidays at times of intense political pressure, and 'Mr Clinton has worked harder than any of them and admits to chronic fatigue': yet 'Mr Clinton is the archetypal workaholic baby boomer', for whom the renaissance weekend is '[h]is favourite means of battery recharging'.

As noted previously, in the cultural script of 2010-11, the Baby Boomer character tends to be portrayed as that of selfish self-indulgence, where concern for the self has blinded this generation to the needs of their children. The dataset from the Clinton election reveals a more ambiguous understanding of the Boomer character, where the imperative of self-actualisation was seen to take an external form: for example, through a commitment to work and public life. This was not universally lauded: 'It's a kind of group therapy for moderate baby-boomers,' David Keene, a Republican strategist, remarked of the renaissance weekends described above (Dettmer 1992, *Times*). But some interesting recent literature does indicate that, for all the Boomers' association with hippie drop-outs and self-actualisation, there is also a relatively higher degree of commitment to work than appears to be shown by the generations that follow (Foster 2013; also see discussion in Whalen and Flacks 1989).

While, as noted above, concerns about the impact of women's equality on parenting were already being aired by the left-leaning press via the Zoe Baird affair, the general sentiment of the Nineties was that the Baby Boomer character combined self-obsession and self-indulgence with commitment, caring, and a vision (of sorts) of the future. This was perceived to compare positively with the apathetic anachronism of the 'Silent' generation, and also with the aggressive alienation of the Boomers' successors, 'Generation X'.

A masterful article by music journalist Jon Savage (1993) on the rise of grunge in the early 1990s argues that Nirvana's breakthrough single 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' was the 'harbinger' of a generation gap, 'between the 25 and 45-year-old baby-boomers whose taste had dominated the record industry and the 15 to 24-year-old "baby busters"'. Nirvana's rise to fame 'coincided with two important books which, during 1991, changed America's perception of its youth'. The first was Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X*, which 'seemed to define a new generation of middle-class anomie: the twentysomething slackers, who dropped out of work just as the early Eighties yuppies celebrated it. Its characters seemed narcoleptic, drifting through a world of pop culture references devoid of all meaning, postmodernism anthropomorphised'. The second was Donna Gaines's *Teenage Wasteland*, 'a non-fiction work, part documentary, part cogent sociology, inspired by the apparently inexplicable 1987 suicide of four "rock'n'roll kids" in Bergenfield, New Jersey. Several chapters are full of descriptions of teenage hell: boredom, restricted mobility, lousy parenting, a society lacking both culture and the rituals that could make an adolescent an adult' (Savage 1993, *Times*).

The construction of Generation X, and subsequent generations such as the 'Generation Y' or the 'Millennials', are worthy objects of study in their own right, and there is no scope to examine them here. However, two features of the discussion of 'Generation X' are noteworthy. The first is that the media discussion of this new, 'lost' generation took place in the British media around the same time as the Clinton election, and contributed both to the framing of social and cultural change in generational terms, and to the relatively positive hue in which the Baby Boomer character was cast. Noting that 'Gaines's final analysis endorses a generational theory of youth,' Savage explains:

The reduced rate of birth between 1965 and 1974 now means that the classic 15 to 24 'teenage' age group which in the Sixties and Seventies formed the baby-boom generation (those born in the postwar baby bulge, 1945-60) is now part of a 'baby bust' generation. Today's teenagers, early victims of Eighties economic cutbacks and late-Eighties recession, have almost no values in America. (Savage 1993, *Times*)

Certainly, the caricatured Californian slackers of Coupland's (1991) *Generation X* were no more representative of a whole generation than were the Sixties generation unit of the Baby Boomers. Indeed, when it comes to musical allegiances, 'the split... is class based: the artier, more nihilist Seattle groups are more popular with students, a vastly larger class in America than in Britain, while the real dead-end kids prefer the heroic, damaged bombast of Guns N' Roses', writes Savage. However, the appearance of Generation X on the cultural scene certainly appeared to jar with the ascendancy of the committed, caring Baby Boomer character type at this time. 'Clinton's election may have created a climate of hope, but these oblique, shadowy messages from the baby-busters pose an awkward question for a president so associated with the baby-boomer generation, a president at whose inauguration Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin and Bob Dylan all sang,' Savage writes. 'How is the first pop-culture president going to involve today's teenagers in the society they will inherit?' (Savage 1993, *Times*)

The second significant feature of the Generation X frame is the extent to which, in recent years, the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem has come to pose the 'baby bust' generation as a virtuous victim of the generation that came before. This point is discussed in Chapter 4, in relation to the 'party metaphor' that is frequently employed by the present-day cultural script to condemn the excess and recklessness of the Boomers, and to bemoan the burden placed on younger generations in 'clearing up the mess'. In this regard, the problem of the Baby Boomer character is no longer seen as how it is going to 'involve' the younger generation in a future that it is creating, but the way that its very desire to shape the future has warped the character of those who follow it.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

Concluding his comprehensive history of the 'Cultural Revolution' of the Sixties, Arthur Marwick (1999) recounts a radio discussion in which he participated, in which '[t]he academic (not a historian!) chairing the discussion put to me the notion that "the sixties was a dry run for the nineties"' (p. 801). Marwick responds, scathingly, that this 'flabby phrase' would seem to suggest 'not so much that in the nineties there was a

return to the practices and values of the sixties, but that in the nineties these practices and values reappeared in a perfected form’ – and ‘[a]t once, one must comment that any notion that the practices and values of the sixties disappeared during some intervening period... is quite mistaken’. He explains:

The sixties was a time of entrepreneurship and private enterprise, a time of the creation and satisfaction of new consumer needs, a time of expansion in the service and entertainment industries. Such developments anticipated aspects of “Thatcherism” (an international phenomenon), rather than being antithetical to them. More critically, those elements of sixties lifestyles which Reagan and Thatcher detested continued to be present during the seventies and were very evident throughout the eighties. (Marwick 1999, p. 802)

Marwick, like Jenkins (2006), correctly identifies the period following the Sixties as one in which the trends of the Sixties were effectively mainstreamed, even despite the crisis thinking that dominated discussions of the economy, and the apparent backlash against cultural relativism and social liberalism.

Analysis of the media discussion of the Clinton years supports this understanding. To this extent that this election marked ‘the political legitimization of the cultural advances ushered in by the sixties’ (*Guardian* 1992), it symbolised the acceptance of a reality that had gradually developed over the previous two decades, rather than a new ‘cultural revolution’. That the Baby Boomers came to personify this moment was due less to the emergence of a distinct generational agency than to the recognition that the ‘old ways’ of framing politics, around class and ideology, were finally exhausted. The decisive political shift of this era was in the convergence of left and right around the pragmatic managerialism of the ‘Third Way’ promoted by the political elite of that time: while members of the Boomer generation happened to be in the driving seat, neither their birth location nor demographic size determined its success.

Chapter 4 discussed the way in which the reaction against the Baby Boomers in the present-day cultural script can be understood as, in part, a reaction against the changes brought about by the Sixties, and the institutionalisation of those changes by

the Clinton and Blair administrations over the 1990s. In this regard, it could be possible to understand the present-day construction of the Baby Boomer generation as a social problem in terms of a combination of the crisis thinking of the Seventies, and the Culture Wars of the Eighties, where both the economic policies of the Clinton/Blair elite and the permissive ideas and behaviours associated with the 'Sixties generation' become, in the jaded years of the early twenty-first century, held responsible for the wide range of social problems that we face today.

Of course, ambivalence about the legacy of the Sixties dates back to the decades immediately following that period. 'Although by no means every baby-boomer was a hippy, a flower child, a student revolutionary or a swinging Londoner, the optimism and idealism amid which they grew up during the Sixties was contagious,' writes Steve Turner in the *Times* (1986b). 'For a few years it seemed as though youth had both the power and the vision to bring about lasting change... In Britain, baby-boomers saw laws passed between 1965 and 1970 which abolished capital punishment and theatrical censorship, legalized abortion and homosexuality and made divorce more easily obtainable.' He continues:

Yet even by the early Seventies, the realization was dawning that all this did not automatically constitute a return to the Garden of Eden. In the November 1970 issue of the underground magazine *Oz*, editor Richard Neville bemoaned the fact that his counter-cultural colleagues had become every bit as violent, intolerant, greedy, devious and manipulative as the 'straight' society they sought to change. 'We blithely declare World War III on our parents and yet have already forgotten how to smile at our friends', he concluded.

At the same time John Lennon was saying that the Sixties had altered nothing. The same people were in control and the class system remained intact. 'The dream is over,' he announced. 'It's just the same except I'm 30 and a lot of people have got long hair, that's all'. (Turner 1986b, *Times*)

This ambivalence runs through the narrative of the Baby Boomers over the period from 1986 to 2011, with different weight being given to the 'positives' and

'negatives' of the Sixties at different times, generally reflecting the temper of the moment in which the articles are written. In all cases, the critique of the Sixties offered through the problematisation of the Baby Boomers is a highly partial one: while it attacks the perceived excesses of certain attitudes or behaviours associated with the 'Sixties generation', it remains the case that convergence around the politics of the 'Third Way', along with many 'politically correct' orthodoxies associated with the Boomer cultural elite, remain accepted and promoted.

However, to see the construction of the Baby Boomer problem purely in terms of an allegorical commentary on the Sixties would be to underestimate the significance of the way that historical events have become framed in generational terms. That the present-day critique often seems to take the form of an attack on the 'Baby Boomer generation', rather than (for example) a direct questioning of the Sixties, or the Nineties, speaks to a more fundamental anxiety within post-war Anglo-American society about the relationship between past, present and future, and the role of generations in mediating this relationship.

## **Chapter 7 Conclusion: Mannheim revisited - The problem of generations today**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The research presented in this thesis has investigated how the Baby Boomer generation has become constructed as a social problem in Britain. My approach to this question is based on the understanding that the problem of generations is, following Mannheim (1952), to do with the mediation between past, present and future, where society is preserved, made anew, and at certain points transformed, by the interaction between the new members of society who come into ‘fresh contact’ with the existing cultural heritage. The sociology of knowledge seeks to understand this mediation, by accounting for how generational location interacts with wider social forces to develop ideas in the present day.

My research contributes to the sociology of knowledge by analysing the development of a cultural script that defines the problem of generations as a key concern for modern society, and in so doing presents a particular generation – the Baby Boomers – as the cause of this problem. By tracking the development of this cultural script over a quarter of a century, I indicate that both the attributes of the Baby Boomer generation, and the importance attached to generation as a political or social category, have changed over time, and are affected by wider political, social, and cultural shifts. This finding has a number of implications for how we think about the construction of the problem of generations in the present day.

### **7.2 Focus of the study**

The cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem, analysed in Chapter 4, in many ways can be seen as one form of a wider critique: of the economic crisis, the welfare state, moral ‘permissiveness’, or cultural relativism. My analysis indicates, in line with the points pursued by White (2013), that ‘generationalism’ has come to the fore as the established narratives of the past have lost their purchase. To put it bluntly: whereas social or cultural critiques over the twentieth century tended to focus on such social cleavages as class, race, or sex, and saw problems or solutions in terms of political

differences between left and right, the recent period tends to focus on the problems allegedly caused by the domination of one generation over another.

The finding that claims made about the Baby Boomer generation have changed over time, and that claims made about this generation in the present day take a particular form, support the arguments made by White (2013), Walker (1996) and others about the way that a discourse of ‘generationalism’ can be used to marshal political support for arguments that were previously posed in different terms. For example housing shortages, and the rising cost of healthcare and pensions systems, have been discussed in their own terms for many decades. But by posing such arguments in terms of a sudden crisis caused by a ‘silver tsunami’ of retiring Baby Boomers, or by wealthy Boomers occupying large houses or living too long, such debates can be deflected from a discussion of wider structural problems. Furthermore, movements designed to promote ‘intergenerational equity’ between old and young can be used to justify the ‘squeezing’ of pensions, or the rationing of healthcare.

However, movements organised around the demand for intergenerational fairness, justice, or equity, currently tend to have a ‘top-down’ character, and have enjoyed limited success to date, either in the USA or Britain. This may reflect the way in which the current debate about intergenerational conflict appears to be led by a small group of claimsmakers, who are already influential within the political and cultural elite. While such ideas have had an impact on media debates, it does not seem to follow from this that society more broadly is engaging in a ‘generation war’.

My research complicates the claim that the claim that the Baby Boomer generation bears responsibility for a wide range of deep-rooted social problems. In addition, I have drawn attention to the diffusion of the Baby Boomer problem from the USA to the UK, highlighting two moments in recent history – the election of US President Bill Clinton, and the discussion surrounding the first American Baby Boomers drawing their Social Security pension – that indicate the way that a problem already articulated in the USA has been used to frame the political and economic situation in Britain. This is significant given the differences between the two countries both in the demographics of the Baby Boom, and the structure of the welfare state; it provides a further indication that the identification of the Baby Boomer problem has



not grown organically out of the problems facing British social policy, but rather has been adopted and adapted from elsewhere, to provide an expedient narrative.

In this regard, this thesis contributes to the social constructionist literature, and supports a critique of ‘generationalism’ that has been pursued elsewhere. The thesis indicates how the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem has been developed largely by a small number of claimsmakers, whose position within the cultural and / or political elite has resulted in their having a disproportionate impact on the media discourse on this subject. It has also shown how the cultural script in operation today has developed and changed over time, underlining the significance of historical context in providing the background against which certain claims are made and gain a wider hearing.

Further research could examine the impact of the discourse of the Baby Boomer problem upon the policy agenda. This impact can be seen as both explicit, and implicit. Willetts (2010a) summarises the ‘central argument’ of *The Pinch* as follows:

[W]e are not attaching sufficient value to the claims of future generations. This is partly because a big disruptive generation of baby boomers has weakened many of the ties between the generations. But it is also an intellectual failure: we have not got a clear way of thinking about the rights of future generations. We are allowing one very big generation to break the inter-generational contract because we do not fully understand it. This is where politics comes in. (Willetts 2010, pp260-261)

In this regard, Willetts is making a call for generations, and ‘the rights of future generations’ in particular, to be made central to policy-making. This approach is already central to the work of some recently-established think-tanks and campaigning organisations. In the UK, these include the Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations at the University of Oxford, launched in 2013, and the Intergenerational Foundation, established in 2011, which has connections with the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations in Germany. I have also noted the US Commission on Global Aging, with which Willetts and the British Labour MP have been involved (see

Chapter 5). Such organisations promote the problem of generations as central to tackling the wider problems facing society today and in the future, from environmental threats to healthcare funding and housing shortages. In July 2014, the Welsh government introduced a ‘Well-being of Future Generations Bill’, which ‘aims to improve well-being in accordance with the sustainable development principle, which means seeking to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Welsh Government 2014).

These examples indicate the extent to which ‘generation’ is becoming explicitly politicised. The argument that existing generations have caused problems for future generations is deployed as a warrant for policy that seeks to change the behaviour of generations in the present to meet certain goals that have been identified as important for the future. While social policy has always attempted to do this, to a greater or lesser extent, the presentation of this approach in generational terms has the effect of personalising social problems. As I indicate below, by critiquing the basis on which social problems have been personalised, findings from this thesis can inform a more temperate approach to policy-making that cautions against emotive, one-sided and indeed vengeful actions towards particular generations.

The politicisation of generation is also evident through the development of an explicit family policy agenda that seeks to shape the behaviour of younger generations through a heightened intervention in, and regulation of, parenting, education, and intergenerational contact within communities (see Lee *et al.* 2014; Furedi 2009; Furedi and Bristow 2010). The idea of the problematic transmission of intergenerational attitudes and behaviours has become incorporated into a wide set of policy claims, around such issues as violence, abuse, and social mobility. As discussed in Chapter 5, the increasing policy dynamic in relation to ageing often focuses on the problems that have come to be associated with the Baby Boomer generation, such as large cohort size, risky health behaviours, and increased longevity.

By situating the development of the Baby Boomer problem within the sociology of knowledge, rather than presuming it to be a development of relations between the generations themselves, the thesis encourages policy-makers to consider

some of the wider agendas that inform the focus on generations today, and some of the potentially problematic consequences of existing and future policy in this arena.

There has been no scope in this thesis to address adequately the policy dimensions of generationalism, and this would be a worthwhile endeavour for future research. In addition, a comparative study of the development of the Baby Boomer problem in Britain and the USA would be a worthwhile endeavour that would reveal many more of the nuances in the construction of the Boomer problem, its diffusion to the Britain, and the differences between the form taken by the discussion in the two countries.

As noted in the earlier chapters, there are a number of approaches that can be taken to the study of the problem of generations, both within sociology and in other disciplines. Some recent studies, such as those research led by Leach (2007) into the Baby Boomers and intergenerational consumption, have researched the attitudes and behaviour of the British Baby Boomer cohort itself, thereby laying the foundations for 'a sociological analysis of the boomer generation' (Phillipson *et. al.* 2008, para 8.8). Other empirical studies into people's lived experiences are, likewise, complicating the portrayal of the Baby Boomers as a homogenous social group, or a particular character type.

A study of how individuals respond to the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem, drawing upon the sociology of informal knowledge described by Swidler and Ardit (1994, p. 321), which examines how 'ordinary people actually take up and use (or reject) the knowledge generated for them by elites', would help to illuminate the extent to which this framing of the problem creates actual generational conflict, and, conversely, the extent to which the strength of generational ties provides a resistance to the internalisation of the elite promotion of the Baby Boomer problem.

As Hareven (1978) suggests, historical memory is affected by the extent to which accounts of the past are handed down to children who have living parents and grandparents; the persistence of firsthand accounts of 'how things were', and their embodiment in people with whom affective bonds are shared, provides an implicit challenge to the promotion of a one-sided cultural script about the problem of a

particular generation. A study of how the Baby Boomer problem is stratified along the lines of class, sex and race would also yield some valuable insights into the dynamics behind the construction of this problem.

### **7.3 The problem of generations today**

The intention of this thesis was to develop the insights offered by Mannheim (1952) about how, why, and under what conditions generation becomes important to the wider process of social change. By analysing the construction of the Baby Boomer problem within the context of the broader political and social shifts of the postwar period, I hoped to gain an understanding of why there should be such an intense focus on ‘generation’ from the political and cultural elite in the present day.

Researching the extent to which the Baby Boomer problem has been socially constructed over time follows a tradition of sociological inquiry that seeks to gain a deeper understanding of social problems. As noted above, the findings of this research explicitly question the idea, currently aired by policymakers and opinion formers, that social policy targeting the Baby Boomer generation as a problem is a politically constructive approach. Implicitly, the approach I have taken to this research questions the extent to which the focus on the problem on generations *in itself* is appropriate to the reality in which we find ourselves today.

As discussed in Chapter 2, generation is a concept that has both a biological and a social meaning. More precisely, we can say that generation has a number of social meanings, which operate simultaneously. The process of cultural renewal described by Mannheim is situated within people, who also exist within intimate, familial and generational relationships to one another. Disagreements over the future direction of society may, on occasion, take on a generational hue; for example, perhaps the most striking feature of the Sixties was its idealised confrontation of young against old. But the construction of the Baby Boomer problem appears to take a rather different form.

The problematisation of the Baby Boomers specifically – rather than the ideas of the past, or the ‘old’ – means that a critique of the recent past has become

personalised, and targeted at a distinct group of people. This has the effect of isolating an individual's generational location from the other (arguably more significant) aspects of their biography that are likely to inform their attitudes, behaviours, and life chances: for example, their social class, ethnic origin, and sex. Such a one-sided perspective runs counter to Mannheim's insistence on the importance of understanding the interaction between generation and other factors, and provides an account that is intellectually unconvincing and empirically questionable.

This process of personalisation has two further, important effects. By situating the conflict of generations as being that between Boomers and Millennials – quite literally, for many in these cohorts, Fathers and Sons (and daughters) – it forces a direct confrontation between the recent past and the immediate future, unmediated by the wider context surrounding the development of ideas and the relationships between people.

Second, it has the effect of importing social conflict from the public realm into the sphere of reproduction, and the realm of intimate relations. When Neil Boorman (2010, p.1) shouts, on the opening page of *It's All Their Fault*, 'DO YOUR PARENTS LOVE YOU? OF COURSE THEY DO. BUT IT HASN'T STOPPED THEM ROBBING YOU BLIND' (emphasis in original), he is only expressing in a more direct and infantile form the message promoted by Willetts, Beckett, Howker and Malik, Howe and Strauss, Hutton, Sandbook and the numerous other writers cited in this thesis, who have promoted the idea that the Baby Boomers are a social problem: namely, that the most pressing social evils of the present day were caused by 'our parents', and the only resolution to this is to make 'our parents' pay.

I noted above that the critique of the Baby Boomers is underpinned by a fundamental anxiety about generational continuity and existential meaning. It is somewhat ironic that this anxiety leads to a way of framing public discourse, and offering policy solutions, that strike at the heart of the intergenerational contract. Blaming 'our parents' for what are, essentially, problems of politics and social policy, rhetorically brings these problems 'home', imbuing them with a level of emotional intensity properly reserved for private family dramas.

In Willetts's claim that the age-old experience of generational responsibility has been reversed, with children now cleaning up their parents' 'mess' (Willetts 2010, p. xv), the intergenerational contract is struck by a blow far harsher than the Sixties' disavowal of anyone over 30. This claim (which, as we have noted, has been widely echoed) essentially brands the Baby Boomers as unfit parents, and strips them of their adult status. The younger generation is incited to despise the experience and decisions of their elders, and at the same time provided with a narrative explaining why the destructiveness of the Boomers has prevented them from making their own future.

Mannheim's sociology of generations sought to understand the interaction between people's generational location and the wider social forces of their time. As discussed in Chapter 2, the interwar period in which Mannheim was writing was a period of rapid social change and intense upheaval. Class politics was the principal mobilising force, which was generated by individuals' location within a social class, and their consciousness of that location. Mannheim sought to understand the development and meaning of generational consciousness in a way that was analogous to that of class; he did not (as is sometimes implied in the literature) see generation as an equivalent to, or replacement for, class, but as an important additional factor in the development of consciousness.

Nearly one hundred years on, there is a widespread sentiment that class no longer provides a force for political mobilisation; and while people remain located within a social class, there is less meaning ascribed to their *consciousness* of a class location. The historical literature briefly reviewed in this thesis indicates that this drift away from class politics has been taking place since the end of the Second World War, and in many ways informed the self-conscious orientation of radical Sixties movements around the 'politics of youth'. But this in turn raises two questions. In the absence of a class consciousness, does a generational consciousness become more important? And in the absence of a class politics, does a politics based on 'generational equity' provide a substitute?

The research conducted here cannot answer these questions. What it can do, however, is to contribute to the sociology of knowledge by clarifying certain features of the construction of the Baby Boomer problem. For example, the understanding that

many claims about the problems caused by the Boomer generation are, in fact, based on pre-existing anxieties about the economy, the welfare state, or the cultural turn of the Sixties, raises doubts about the extent to which there can be said to be a distinctly new ‘problem of generations’ today.

Similarly, the finding that many of the most influential claims made about the problem of the Baby Boomers come from a small number of individuals within the political and cultural elite implicitly challenges the contention that there is a widespread sentiment of resentment against the older generation. Policymakers may wish to position themselves as preventing, or responding to, a ‘war between the generations’ (Kaletsky 2010, *Times*), but there is strikingly little evidence of such a war beyond the pages of the national newspapers. This in turn questions the assumption that the ideas developed in the present day represent a particular generational consciousness, rather than (for example) an attempt by the political and cultural elites to position themselves in response to new developments.

In this respect, we can regard David Willetts’s claim that the new ‘generation gap’ is not one of values, but an economic one, with a critical eye. When we read of high levels of youth unemployment and low levels of wages paid to young people, the cost of housing, the level of pensions enjoyed by (some of) the oldest Baby Boomers who were able to retire before pensions became squeezed, this claim holds a common sense appeal. But the fact of older people holding more wealth than younger people is not a new phenomenon; the issue is whether young people can hope to gain wealth as they become older themselves. The argument presented by Willetts – and most other claimmakers in this discussion, from across the political spectrum – is that low wages, high house prices, and dwindling public services are all the future has to offer. In terms of the state of the British economy, this vision may be a correct one. But it is not brought about by generational conflict, the behaviour of the Baby Boomers, or the emergence of a gap between young and old: it is better understood as an expression of economic stagnation and ideological confusion.

The claim that the Baby Boomers have monopolised society’s cultural resources can similarly be critically appraised. Again following Mannheim, we can best understand the construction of the Baby Boomer problem as representing the

development of a particular ‘generation unit’ in the 1960s, which defined the *Zeitgeist* of that era and went on to influence subsequent times. Historical literature of the postwar period indicates that this *Zeitgeist* had a powerful cultural effect way beyond that decade, which was then institutionalised through the Third Way politics of the Clinton era. Marwick (1999), Jenkins (2006), and Furedi (2014) have argued, from different perspectives, that the impact of the Sixties was profound in re-shaping the norms and values by which postwar western society operated. In this regard, we can understand why a dominant feature of the past four decades has been an ongoing ‘culture war’, between the norms and values institutionalised as a result of the Sixties, and the ‘traditional’ values that the Sixties is seen to have usurped.

The Baby Boomer generation in its entirety has been identified with this Sixties moment – despite the fact that the activism of the Sixties, and the politics of the Nineties, involved only a small section of the privileged elite, primarily in the USA. Here, again, Mannheim’s understanding of generation units can help us make sense of the phenomenon. At any particular historical moment, he argued, the extent to which a particular generation unit comes to express the *Zeitgeist* is affected by the wider context, which can be more or less receptive to its ideas. Furthermore, other proximate generations, and intellectuals, may attach themselves to a generation unit that expresses strongly the mood of the times. Extrapolating from this, we can see how the Baby Boomer generation – already defined widely, as a 20-year cohort – also comes to be seen to encompass the (older) intellectual figureheads, such as Marcuse and Mills, that developed the ideas associated with the Boomers; and to dominate the worldview developed by the smaller ‘Generation X’, the ‘lost’ generation that, from its birth, was seen to have as its defining feature the fact that it was *not* the Baby Boom.

In both the economic and cultural critiques of the Baby Boomers, what is most striking is the passivity accorded to younger generations in the process of social and cultural renewal. Here, Mannheim’s understanding of the problem of generations can help to provide a critical perspective on the contemporary cultural script. In addition to mystifying social problems, the construction of the Baby Boomers as a social problem also poses a threat to relations between the generations, by fomenting generational conflict and situating it within the sphere of reproduction: specifically, the family, and its surrounding affective and community bonds.



While the ‘economic’ problem of the Baby Boomers today is often underpinned by an anxiety about ageing, much of the ‘cultural’ problem derives from a reappraisal of the student protest movement, and is framed in terms of attitudes and behaviours generally associated with youth. In this regard, the current attack on today’s elderly does not involve a rhetorical privileging of youth: it is *also* an attack on youth, as a period of life associated with experimentation, rebellion, and self-definition. Claimsmakers’ focus on young people’s inability to buy houses or hope for decent pensions speaks to the way that the experience of youth is, to borrow a phrase from Eisenstadt (1963), ‘flattened out’.

In the claim that the Boomers have monopolised wealth and culture, leaving young people ‘stuck outside, their noses are pressed to the window’ (Willets 2010b, *Times*), there is a presumption that the integration of young people into society means simply slotting them on to the ‘ladder’ (Beckett 2010b, *Guardian*) towards the same kind of existence enjoyed by their parents. This one-sided presentation of social continuity fails to acknowledge both the subjectivity of youth, and the true responsibility of adult society. The vital importance of ‘fresh contact’ between new members of society and their elders is underplayed, in favour of a fatalistic vision of a future already determined by the behaviour and experience of the Boomer generation.

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

The problem is not, I conclude, that the ongoing influence of the Baby Boomers denies younger generations the space to express themselves and exert an influence of their own. Rather, it is that the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem fails to acknowledge the extent to which young people will make the world anew. One of the central problems with generationalism is that it leads to an evasion of the problems of the present by attempting to construct ‘solutions’ for future generations. The responsibility of adult society has been seen, historically, as preserving the cultural heritage of the past and engaging with the problems of the present, while recognising that younger generations can, will, and *should* use that heritage to make their own world in the future.

The study of the problem of generations would be most fruitfully pursued by attempting to engage with how the younger generations perceive their world, and how they make sense of their own past, present, and future. This would allow us to understand with more precision the historical impact of the Baby Boomers upon the generations shaping the world today.

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Wolfe, T. (1976) 'The "Me" Decade and the Third Great Awakening.' *New York*, 23 August: 26-40.

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## **APPENDIX 1: Complete list of articles reviewed using Qualitative Media**

### **Analysis.**

<b>1986-7</b>		<b>Sample = 30 / 34</b>	
<b>Author</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Publication</b>
Binyon, Michael	12 May 1987	Shrewd Du Pont distances himself from New Right	<i>Times</i>
Bremner, Charles	07 February 1987	Wealth gets low rating in American dream	<i>Times</i>
Bremner, Charles	07 February 1987	The fruit of the Age of Aquarius is the new age of puritanism	<i>Times</i>
Bremner, Charles	14 April 1987	Letter from New York: Millions walking back to fattiness	<i>Times</i>
Bremner, Charles	05 May 1987	Spectrum: Jaguar roars again	<i>Times</i>
Bremner, Charles	30 July 1987	Beatles sue over use of song as TV jingle	<i>Times</i>
Bremner, Charles	21 November 1987	Letter from New York: Chic harvest of couch potatoes	<i>Times</i>
Brummer, Alex	26 May 1987	Hart rivals cheered by lurid tales: the faltering fortunes of the Democrats	<i>Guardian</i>
Brummer, Alex and White, Michael	09 May 1987	Scramble starts as Hart quits race	<i>Guardian</i>
Donnelly, Gabrielle	05 December 1986	Divorce of the incompatible statistics	<i>Times</i>
Edgar, David	07 July 1986	Agenda: It wasn't so naff in the 60s after all - The Conservative Party's assault on the legacy of the 1960's	<i>Guardian</i>
Ellis, Barbara	11 January 1986	Weekend Money: Leavening the lump sum - Making the most of a large amount of money	<i>Guardian</i>
Heath, Ray	06 May 1987	City Diary: Burying the opposition.	<i>Times</i>
Mather, Victoria	20 January 1986	Spectrum: Record revolution at the megastore.'	<i>Times</i>
Matthews, Virginia	23 April 1987	Empty nests lined with gold.	<i>Guardian</i>
May, Tony	11 May 1987	Jogging with the Pose Factor	<i>Guardian</i>
McRae, Hamish	08 December 1987	Financial Notebook: Disappearing youth.	<i>Guardian</i>
Moorhead, Caroline	04 February 1987	Wednesday Page: Too many, too old?	<i>Times</i>
Morgan, Andrew	13 November 1987	Poll shows British teenagers want cash more than love	<i>Times</i>
Morris, Bailey	17 February 1986	From dream to droop / Disillusionment of the baby boom generation	<i>Times</i>
Nedelson, Regina	29 October 1987	Women (Over Here): Sex and the single man	<i>Guardian</i>
Parsons, Judith	20 March 1987	Special Report on Arezzo (1): The golden city on a Tuscan hill	<i>Times</i>
Shearer, Ann	04 February 1987	Society Tomorrow: A change in the older order / Ageing in US and British population	<i>Guardian</i>
Smith, David	25 March 1987	Trends: The mysterious case of 10,000 lost in the fog	<i>Times</i>
<i>Times</i>	04 December 1987	Births, deaths and marriages are declining	<i>Times</i>
Tran, Mark	15 June 1987	American Notebook: Democrats go for the idea of 'human capital' in their battle for the White House	<i>Guardian</i>
Turner, Steve	11 August 1986	'Spectrum: Peter Pan and the mid-life crisis'.	<i>Times</i>
Turner, Steve	12 August 1986	'Spectrum: From protest to participation / Impact of the post-war generation.'	<i>Times</i>
Turner, Steve	13 August 1986	'Spectrum: In the money but out of the swing.'	<i>Times</i>

Tylecote, Andrew	22 May 1987	Economics Agenda: Back to Keynes - or how the baby boom deepened the depression	<i>Guardian</i>
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<b>1992-3</b>			
Author	Date	Title	Publication
		<b>Sample = 83 / 206</b>	
		Aerobics enthusiasts are getting into the swim of a new kind of exercise - underwater	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Atkinson, Louise	01 September 1992		
Bannister, Matthew	18 September 1993	New Age Pop	<i>Times</i>
Bremner, Charles	13 July 1992	Revising, not revolting	<i>Times</i>
		Inauguration: US comment: America puts hope in Baby-Boomers	<i>Guardian</i>
Broder, David	20 January 1993		
Brodie, Ian	16 January 1993	Clinton kicks off five-day party	<i>Times</i>
Bunting, Madeleine	16 July 1992	The time of her life	<i>Guardian</i>
Burchill, Julie	22 March 1992	Scotching the liberal myths	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
Burton, Tony	16 July 1992	Could the comeback kid go all the way?	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Campbell, Jenny	14 November 1992	Smash a plate a day...	<i>Times</i>
<i>Daily Mail</i>	06 July 1992	This could be love	<i>Daily Mail</i>
		The small-town step away from the White House; Cowboys and catfish by the river -	
<i>Daily Mail</i>	26 October 1992	how Bill Clinton's path to power began in a place called Hope	<i>Daily Mail</i>
<i>Daily Mail</i>	03 November 1992	Kennedy with a touch of Elvis	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Davies, Jessica	17 December 1992	Sitting targets in the new tights war	<i>Daily Mail</i>
		Budget-meal babies; Britons shun ready-made infant food in favour of home cooking	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Davis, Jacki	08 February 1992		
Dearlove, Desmond	20 February 1992	Paths from the plateau	<i>Times</i>
		Clinton will play holiday role as Renaissance man	<i>Times</i>
Dettmer, Jamie	30 December 1992		
Diamod, Joan	20 February 1993	News From The Front	<i>Times</i>
		Survey finds how life brightens up for the fiftysomethings	<i>Guardian</i>
Erlichman, James	09 November 1993		
Fletcher, Martin	23 December 1992	The dove	<i>Times</i>
Fletcher, Martin	23 July 1993	The White House tornado	<i>Times</i>
		Persimmon builds divorce boom into future profits	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Freeborn, Tim	02 September 1992		
Gordon, George	30 July 1992	The naked truth...	<i>Daily Mail</i>
		The politics of victory; Labour strategist Philip Gould reflects on the lessons for John Smith	
Gould, Philip	06 November 1992	from the successful conduct of the Clinton campaign	<i>Guardian</i>
		Stop the world baby boom, pleads Major	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Greig, Gordon	13 June 1992	Leading article: The Baby Boomers come of age	<i>Guardian</i>
<i>Guardian</i>	07 November 1992	Leading article: What the boomers do with baby	<i>Guardian</i>
<i>Guardian</i>	23 January 1993	'Wonk' word comes of age as baby-boomers learn to talk	<i>Times</i>
Howard, Philip	30 December 1992		
Kaletsky, Anatole	25 February 1993	Yuppies are dead, long live Mambies	<i>Times</i>
Kaus, Mickey	05 May 1992	Clinton: A cocky con man	<i>Guardian</i>
Kelly, Rachel	09 December 1992	Stand by for the baby-boom buyers	<i>Times</i>
Landesman, Cosmo	10 July 1993	Zeitgeist	<i>Guardian</i>
Leslie, Ann	30 October 1992	Can Bush really snatch it from 'Elvis'?	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Lithgow, Adam	04 April 1993	Cost cuts spark plan to privatise pensions	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>

Lyndon, Neil	01 September 1992	Why did we all just f-f-f-fade away?	<i>Times</i>
Macintyre, Ben	14 November 1992	Old hippies inhale sweet smell of success	<i>Times</i>
Macintyre, Ben	20 November 1992	Woodstock in Washington	<i>Times</i>
		Nightmare end to Goldie's dream;	
		Christian's heathen actions spoil the	
Marriott, John	03 April 1992	laughs	<i>Daily Mail</i>
		Hero of a looking glass culture - IQ;	
		Sinclair McKay looks at a children's TV	
McKay, Sinclair	12 January 1992	phenomenon	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
McShane, Mike	09 December 1993	Self-image	<i>Guardian</i>
		And another thing: Before I hung up my	
Moncur, Andrew	25 January 1993	hat as a reporter...	<i>Guardian</i>
Muir, Kate	17 August 1992	To label lovers everywhere	<i>Times</i>
Muir, Kate	09 October 1992	A golden age of grumpies	<i>Times</i>
Muir, Kate	12 February 1993	Together at home, together at work	<i>Times</i>
Myers, Caren	07 August 1993	Rock: Indigo girls	<i>Guardian</i>
Palmer, Paul	10 January 1993	The day-glo baby chair brigade hits town	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
		Generations at war if over-50s are	
		sidelined'	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Poulter, Sean	08 April 1993		<i>Daily Mail</i>
Purgavie, Dermot	16 March 1992	Durmot Purgavie's Letter from America	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Purgavie, Dermot	05 November 1992	Four-letter word shock	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Purgavie, Dermot	16 March 1993	School for spy-speak	<i>Daily Mail</i>
		Pretty well guaranteed to increase	
		circulation	<i>Times</i>
Reed, Jane	04 August 1992		<i>Guardian</i>
Reimer, Susan	10 December 1993	A first lady to be proud of	<i>Guardian</i>
Russell-Walling, Edward	04 May 1992	Design enters a grey area	<i>Times</i>
Savage, Jon	20 February 1993	The return of rock	<i>Times</i>
		Kangaroo kid hops to it: Baby-Boomer	
		Michael Jackson is reshaping BBC 2 as its	
		new controller	<i>Guardian</i>
Saynor, James	25 August 1993		<i>Guardian</i>
Sheehy, Gail and Parsons, Sandra	10 March 1993	Hollywood and the final taboo; A change for the better	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Sinclair, David	11 May 1992	Stars from another country	<i>Times</i>
Sinclair, David	24 September 1993	John, Paul, George, Ringo and greed	<i>Times</i>
		Graveyard of the vanities: Downfall of the man who symbolised Wall Street's lust for	
		money	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Southworth, June	16 January 1992		<i>Times</i>
Stothard, Peter	31 March 1992	Babyboomers coming of age	<i>Times</i>
<i>Times</i>	12 December 1992	Clinton's team	<i>Times</i>
<i>Times</i>	02 October 1993	The state of pop	<i>Times</i>
<i>Times</i>	09 November 1993	Pensions Clarity	<i>Times</i>
Tisdall, Simon	23 July 1992	Quayle, Bush's lame duck	<i>Guardian</i>
Tisdall, Simon	08 October 1992	Not so fast, Slick Willie	<i>Guardian</i>
Tisdall, Simon	29 December 1992	Clinton joins in marathon gabfest	<i>Guardian</i>
		American notebook: New World Order	
		could replace tanks with banks	<i>Guardian</i>
Tran, Mark	09 November 1992	American notebook: The tills are jingling but is it merely a holiday respite?	<i>Guardian</i>
Tran, Mark	21 December 1992		<i>Guardian</i>
Travis, Alan	25 July 1992	Smith goes for team with modern appeal	<i>Guardian</i>
Usher, Shaun and Marriott, John	10 July 1992	Trading parents: Children who make their parents look like adolescents	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Walker, Martin	13 July 1992	Clinton ahead as Perot blunders	<i>Guardian</i>
		Clinton pledges renewal: First US baby- boomer administration takes over - Clear	
		signal to QBY	<i>Guardian</i>
Walker, Martin	21 January 1993	Republican kind of gaffe opens a new	<i>Guardian</i>
Walker, Martin	23 January 1993	Democratic era	<i>Guardian</i>
Walker, Martin	02 July 1993	What the spin-doctor ordered	<i>Guardian</i>

Walker, Martin	07 October 1993	Sixties radical jailed for killing	<i>Guardian</i>
Waterhouse, Keith	16 July 1992	This could be the last time	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Webb, Ian R.	16 July 1993	Dedicated toddlers of fashion	<i>Times</i>
Weldon, Fay	22 March 1992	War against women that never ended	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
Westcott, Patsy	21 July 1992	The baby boomers back on the Pill again	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Woolcock, Keith	07 November 1993	New world of Generation X	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
Wright, Michael	04 June 1992	Growing pains	<i>Times</i>
Wright, Pearce	26 January 1993	Experiences worth learning from	<i>Times</i>
Yerassimou, Nicholas	18 June 1992	Second opinion: Critics with attitude	<i>Guardian</i>
Young, Toby	01 May 1992	Fear and loathing in LA	<i>Guardian</i>

<b>1998-9</b>			
<b>Sample = 26 / 270</b>			
<b>Author</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Publication</b>
Adcock, Ian.	09 January 1999	Motown's pick-up line wows America.	<i>Times</i>
Armstrong, Paul.	23 June 1999	P&O cruises on with the baby-boomers.	<i>Times</i>
Benady, Alex.	25 June 1999	Think big now to beat the housing bust years.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Benady, Alex.	21 August 1999	Pensions: From baby boom to retirement bust.	<i>Guardian</i>
Birch, Stuart.	05 September 1998	Audi's answer to baby-boom boredom.	<i>Times</i>
Bygrave, Mike.	25 July 1998	From Wall Street to high street.	<i>Guardian</i>
Colgate, Mark.	14 March 1999	A miracle keeps US booming; trust watch.	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
Connolly, Ray.	27 July 1999	An untimely tumble on the tumbril of life.	<i>Times</i>
Connolly, Ray.	07 June 1999	On a stage near you, the secret of eternal youth (wrinkles not included); Why the Stones are so much more than just another bunch of ageing rockers.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Dearlove, Des.	04 June 1998	Learn how to market your talent.	<i>Times</i>
Doughty, Steve.	23 June 1999	Why more of us are making a century.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Elliott, Larry.	05 July 1999	Look forward to a grey future.	<i>Guardian</i>
Franks, Lynne,	22 March 1999	Trend-spotter Lynne Franks keeps us up to date on the latest from LA.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Hope, Jenny.	28 April 1999	Middle- class men 'will beat heart attacks by 2025'.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Jeffreys, Daniel.	22 April 1999	A nation corrupt to the core.'	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Lewis, Jemima.	18 July 1999	Paperbacks, by Jemima Lewis: Forever Young by Jim Schnabel	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
Macintyre, Ben.	10 August 1999	Abortions "cut crime rate in America".	<i>Times</i>
Maddox, Bronwen.	20 February 1999	Can't help falling in love with...	<i>Times</i>
Millar, Stuart.	14 November 1998	The anything goes generation.	<i>Guardian</i>
Polan, Brenda.	24 February 1999	Washed up and faded out; As Levis announce massive job losses, why blue jeans - once the symbol of youth and rebellion -- have finally had their day.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Potton, Ed.	18 December 1999	How was it for you?	<i>Times</i>
Redwood, John.	20 May 1999	Good bye Britannia.	<i>Mail</i>
Toynbee, Polly.	04 February 1998	We're all young now.	<i>Guardian</i>
Varadarajan, Tunku.	21 January 1998	Generation Vex.	<i>Times</i>
Welch, Jilly.	08 May 1999	In search of spoilt geeky slackers; Wear your gen X or Y badge with pride.	<i>Guardian</i>
Whitworth, Damian.	26 December 1998	Capitol jitters as US hunts "Dirty Dozen".	<i>Times</i>

<b>2006-7</b>		<b>Sample = 44 / 448</b>	
<b>Author</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Publication</b>
Aitkens, Michael	25 February 2007	Talkin 'bout my degeneration.	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
Baldwin, Tom	17 November 2007	All quiet on the first battlefield of cultural civil war.	<i>Times</i>
Beckett, Francis	28 February 2006	Baby boomers head for flower power struggle'.	<i>Guardian</i>
Bennett, Rosemary	01 May 2007	Why 50somethings live like 20somethings.'	<i>Times</i>
Bone, James	17 October 2007	From boom to bust: the silver generation that could leave Uncle Sam broke.	<i>Times</i>
Bremner, Charles	06 December 2006	Old chanteuses relive glory years.	<i>Times</i>
Bryant, Sue	18 October 2007	Pampering the wealthy is being taken to extremes.	<i>Times</i>
Burkeman, Oliver.	03 July 2006	Bush: fighting fit and shocked to be 60.	<i>Guardian</i>
<i>Daily Mail</i>	19 June 2007	A real mid-life crisis.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
<i>Daily Mail</i>	08 July 2006	We're not old until 66; For baby boomers, middle age spreads well beyond your fifties.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
<i>Daily Mail</i>	04 December 2007	Golden Oldies widen the equity gap.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
<i>Daily Mail</i>	16 May 2007	Sit in the sun? We'd rather be cooking.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Doughty, Steve	14 April 2007	The baby boomers left paying for their children and parents.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Doughty, Steve	06 April 2007	80pc of the UK's wealth belongs to the over-50s.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Emmett, Susan	17 March 2006	Estate of emergency.	<i>Times</i>
Feinmann, Jane	26 September 2006	The Mid-Lifebingers.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Goldenberg, Suzanne.	17 January 2007	Turning point in US as more women choose not to marry	<i>Guardian</i>
Goldenberg, Suzanne.	18 October 2007	Demographics: The 'silver tsunami' that threatens to overwhelm US social security system.	<i>Guardian</i>
Gould, Mark.	31 May 2006	Society: Public Inquiry: Ailsa Ogilvie, director of Heyday, a group that offers the 'babyboomer' generation advice on retirement.	<i>Guardian</i>
Hanson, Michele	21 September 2006	G2: Short cuts: Baby boomers go bust.	<i>Guardian</i>
Hawkes, Nigel	20 February 2007	A generation faces years of misery due to heart disease.	<i>Times</i>
Harkin, James	18 February 2006	Big idea: Boomerageddon.	<i>Guardian</i>
Hoggart, Paul	17 February 2007	The slippery slope.	<i>Times</i>
Karpf, Anne	27 January 2007	Ed Balls wants us to teach kids about money. Well, this is what I'll say...	<i>Guardian</i>
Lewis, Jason	27 August 2006	'Baby boomer' revolt hits Blair.	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
Lewis, Leo	08 October 2007	A loan that helps couples go solo.	<i>Times</i>
Lyall, Joanna	20 June 2007	Ageing is no-go area for baby boomers.	<i>Guardian</i>
Macaskill, Grace	12 July 2006	Health alert for the baby boom drinkers.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Markosky, Cheryl	29 October 2006	The homes that could win the grey vote.	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
Milner, Mark	15 August 2006	TUC: Baby boomers forced out of work, says TUC.	<i>Guardian</i>
The Mirror	14 September 2006	Asbestos threat still real for baby boomers.	<i>Mirror</i>
Parry, Vivienne	23 September 2006	Generation games.	<i>Times</i>
Phillips, Melanie	01 April 2006	Boomerageddon.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Philp, Catherine	06 October 2006	Golden State faces Boomerageddon as "me generation" turns it grey.	<i>Times</i>



Riddell, Peter.	17 October 2006	Willetts: 'A bleak financial inheritance awaits Maggie's children.'	<i>Times</i>
Sandbrook, Dominic	26 February 2006	Why it's OK for you to hate hippies. With firm toehold in US, Aviva expects big returns.	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
Seib, Christine	20 November 2006	Short-sighted Treasury matched by myopic workers.	<i>Times</i>
Senior, Antonia	08 April 2006	Family ties will strengthen with the generation cash gap.	<i>Times</i>
Senior, Antonia	17 March 2007	Toxic generation.'	<i>Times</i>
Shadwick, Keith	06 March 2007	Baby boomers shift the age of optimum sexiness.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Shilling, Jane	08 June 2007	The problem with old age – curtains.	<i>Times</i>
Turner, Janice	01 April 2006	Smith & Nephew pins its hopes on ailing, ageing baby-boomers.	<i>Times</i>
Walsh, Fiona	10 February 2006	Blair and Brown unite to face the future.	<i>Guardian</i>
Webster, Philip.	28 November 2006		<i>Times</i>

<b>2008-9</b>		<b>Sample = 35 / 341</b>	
<b>Author</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Publication</b>
Arnot, Chris	28 April 2009	Autumn of love: Interview: Martin Knapp: Chris Arnot meets a professor who aims to give the baby boomer generation a groovy old age.	<i>Guardian</i>
Bennett, Rosemary	21 January 2008	'Grey Army' chooses the shops over charity work.	<i>Times</i>
Bird, Michael	01 April 2008	Baby-boomer crisis.	<i>Times</i>
Bone, James	15 August 2008	Whites outnumbered in a generation as immigrants change face of America.	<i>Times</i>
Bridle, Christine	09 October 2009	(Letters) 'Thank the boomers' Britain is growing old and we're not ready; Baby-boomers pose an economic threat,	<i>Times</i>
Chynoweth, Carly	22 May 2009	George Magnus says. Will the Government take heed? Schools 'timebomb' as 55% of heads near retirement.	<i>Times</i>
Curtis, Polly	19 June 2008	'I'm working on humility. That's new'	<i>Guardian</i>
Dodd, Celia	19 July 2008	Your inheritance has gone... over the Niagara Falls	<i>Times</i>
Dyson, Richard	26 July 2009	X-factor that marks out Generation Y.	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
Hoare, Stephen	17 September 2008	Tax and mend: how to get pensions working again: Britain's generation gap in retirement savings	<i>Times</i>
Inman, Phillip	24 March 2009	is a ticking timebomb. But what is the solution?	<i>Guardian</i>
Inman, Phillip	04 June 2009	Financial: Analysis: Baby-boom workers become retirement aristocracy.	<i>Guardian</i>
Keegan, Victor	09 October 2008	Technology: Opinion: Connecting older people to the world.	<i>Guardian</i>
Kelly, Tom	03 July 2009	Over 55? It's the time of your life (but spare a thought for those poor under-25s)	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Koster, Olinka	05 June 2009	Pensions aristocracy	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Lister, Sam	11 April 2009	Baby-boomers are binning specs in favour of implants.	<i>Times</i>
MacMurdo, S. D. <i>et al.</i>	02 September 2008	(Letters) 'Thank the baby-boomers for a better world'	<i>Times</i>
MacRae, Fiona	14 November 2009	Health timebomb hits baby boomers	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Magnus, George	03 August 2009	Recovery fragile and long-term prospects	<i>Times</i>

Magnus, George	20 June 2009	unclear. Beware of growing oldies; Britain's population is rapidly ageing. Unless we act swiftly,	<i>Times</i>
		conflict between the young and the old over resources is inevitable	
Morrison, Richard	23 July 2008	If senior citizen Sir Mick can keep rocking - so can we.	<i>Times</i>
Morrison, Richard	22 July 2009	So we got to the Moon, but hey - were the Sixties really so great?	<i>Times</i>
Reed, Jane	01 September 2008	(Letters) 'Blaming the boomers.' SOS - save our savers, unfairly punished;	<i>Times</i>
		The Government should remember it was debt,	
Rees-Mogg, William	26 January 2009	rather than sensible saving of money, which led to the banking crisis.	<i>Times</i>
Rumbelow, Helen	11 April 2008	There's no jail like home.	<i>Times</i>
Rust, David	10 November 2009	Reply Letters and emails: From baby boomers to boom and bust.	<i>Guardian</i>
Salmon, James	20 May 2009	This is the worst time in living memory to retire.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Senior, Antonia	18 June 2009	They dream of joining - but the home owners club is highly exclusive;	<i>Times</i>
		Even with the housing market stirring, the young are excluded.	
Taylor, Katie	09 November 2008	Boomers in knowledge crunch fear.	<i>Mail on Sunday</i>
		Baby-boomers reject old idea of retirement.	
<i>Times</i>	05 February 2009	Despite the baby boomers ageing, we can afford to care	<i>Times</i>
Toynbee, Polly	13 May 2008		<i>Guardian</i>
van der Post, Lucia	15 November 2008	The Sixty set turns 60.	<i>Times</i>
Vine, Sarah	30 August 2008	Farewell to the boomers who busted us	<i>Times</i>
		Today's little darlings ...or tomorrow's little monsters?	
Vine, Sarah	25 November 2008		<i>Times</i>
Wheatley, Jane	31 March 2008	The new hip-op generation.	<i>Times</i>

<b>2010-11</b>		<b>Sample = 50 / 448</b>	
<b>Author</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Publication</b>
Adkins, Colin.	8 July 2010	Letter: Don't scapegoat the baby boomers.	<i>Guardian</i>
		'Many more will go to university than in my generation - we must not reverse that':	
Aitkenhead, Decca.	21 November 2011	David Willetts talks to Decca Aitkenhead. Talking 'bout my generation: More boomer memories: "Women's lib was our greatest achievement".	<i>Guardian</i>
Appignanesi, Lisa.	22 August 2010		<i>Observer</i>
Atherton, Mark.	28 September 2010	How to profit from an ageing population.	<i>Times</i>
Barrow, Becky.	1 January 2011	Record number to turn 65 next year.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Barrow, Becky.	11 October 2011	Baby Bust! generation.	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Bates, Daniel.	14 July 2011	'Middle age doesn't stop until you're 70!'	<i>Daily Mail</i>
		The grasping generation: The baby boomers are denying everyone else the freedoms that	
Beckett, Francis.	6 July 2010	they once took for granted.	<i>Guardian</i>
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