

From Brexit to the pensions crisis, how did the Baby Boomers get the blame for everything?

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/02/11/baby-boomers-blame/

11/02/2017

Baby Boomers – those who are currently between 50 and 70 years old – are often blamed by younger generations for many issues, from those associated with pensions and healthcare, to the unaffordability of housing, and even the vote to leave the EU. Jennie Bristow outlines the discourse and explains its implications.



Amidst the raw outrage that followed the EU referendum vote on 23 June 2016, one generation found itself to be a particular target. ‘Baby boomers, you have already robbed your children of their future. Don’t make it worse by voting for Brexit,’ [appealed James Moore](#) in the *Independent* the day before the vote. “‘This vote doesn’t represent the younger generation who will have to live with the consequences’”: Millennials vent fury at baby boomers for voting Britain OUT of the EU’, [reported Alex Matthews](#) for the *Mail* two days later. As the recriminations flew, an image took hold: hordes of wealthy, powerful Baby Boomers, engaged in a generational conspiracy to do everything possible to rob the young of their rightful future.

‘This is not the first time our generation has suffered this kind of treatment,’ complained [Philip Bronk from London](#) on the *Independent*’s letters page. He echoed the now well-established cultural script of Boomer-blaming:

‘The baby boomers subsidised their lives with massive public borrowing, then voted for austerity; they enjoyed final salary pension schemes, then abolished them; they enjoyed free university education, then voted to abolish that too; they enjoyed public utilities, then sold them off; and now, after enjoying a lifetime of EU citizenship, they’ve voted to take it away from us – not even to save money, but simply to give them a nationalistic thrill. Enough is enough!’

Such generational bitterness evades some of the more nuanced features of the Brexit vote: such as the split *within* generations. Older people were more likely to have voted ‘Leave’ than younger people, but [polls suggest](#) that just under two-fifths of Baby Boomers (generally – albeit contentiously – defined as those born between 1945 and 1965, now aged between about 50 and 70) voted to remain in the EU.

As for why the Boomers, *as a generation*, should be associated with a vote to Leave, the media narrative offers little specific explanation. A destructive selfishness is presumed – although, as [Judith Woods suggests](#) in the *Telegraph*, many Brexit-voting Boomers were ‘genuinely convinced they were doing what was best for Britain, regardless of the fallout’. Knee-jerk post-Brexit Boomer blaming seems to rely most heavily on a generalised, and increasingly consolidated, sentiment that the political, cultural, and economic difficulties that we face today are the fault of people born in the two decades after the Second World War.

The narrative of Boomer-blaming is the subject of a [recent article](#), which sought to understand the evolution of claims that the Boomer generation are responsible for myriad social problems – from overpriced housing to the global economic crisis to the difficulties afflicting pensions and healthcare provision. I conducted a media analysis of articles published in a sample of national British newspapers from 1986 to 2011, to understand how the discussion of the Boomer generation has changed over this time. I found that, while the Boomers have been of some *interest* to British newspapers for a number of years, it is only in recent years that this generation has been constructed predominantly as a *problem*; and that it has been constructed as a problem in two main ways.



First, the Boomers are constructed as an economic problem. As a relatively large generation, they stand accused of using a disproportionate share of society's resources. This coincides with a wider anxiety about the effects of an ageing population, and the problems afflicting the welfare state. Thus, the trope of 'Boomergeddon' is used in 2006, in articles speculating about the impact of the Boomers' impending retirement, and reflects and reinforces a negative image of 'ageing'.

Particularly since the global financial crisis of 2007-8, Boomer-blaming has also focused on their historical location: children of the 'post-war Boom' whose coming-of-age is associated with the 1960s. Not only are they draining the pension pot, it is claimed: they have used up *everything*. Back in 2008, [the journalist Sarah Vine wrote](#) in the *Times* that members of this 'extraordinary generation' were not only 'economically blessed':

'they also had some of the most hedonistic and uncomplicated fun since the Romans: all the sex (by the time that we came of age, HIV had put a stop to all that), the best music (I'm sorry, Coldplay is no match for Jimi Hendrix), all the easy idealism of privilege.'

A heavily-moralised narrative constructs the Boomer generation as a cultural problem, via their association with the Sixties, and in turn blames this generation for political mismanagement, economic crisis, and a selfish, hedonistic approach to life. The trope of 'Boomergeddon' comes to symbolise the problem of a generation that, allegedly, has dominated society by its size and outlook, and wreaked havoc for those born later.

As I outline in my article, Boomer-blaming incorporates a number of troubling simplifications and assertions. The assumption that the Boomer generation as a whole shared a particular experience associated with some of its members (university education, final salary pension schemes, 'all the sex'), and that the Sixties generation somehow missed the Seventies, refuses to recognise inequalities, differential experiences, and historical shifts, and imposes a uniformity of opinion on a heterogeneous group.

The elision of 'Baby Boomers' with 'old people' presents the elderly as a burden to society – even when they are still actively middle-aged. This, too, should give us pause. In the making of "Boomergeddon", we can see how apocalyptic warnings about a demographic pensions time-bomb lead to a discussion about the problem of longevity,

with its implication that economic problems would be ameliorated if only unproductive older people would shuffle of this mortal coil with greater haste. The narrative of post-Brexit Boomer blaming, meanwhile, has been replete with cries of 'generational betrayal', underpinned by the claim that the older generation '[will not be around to see the damage wreaked](#)' by the decision to leave the EU. According to such logic, disenfranchisement is too good for them.

Boomer-blaming often wraps itself in the clothes of 'inter-generational justice'. I suggest that its effect is rather to foment division, and encourage a fatalistic sense of resentment and powerlessness among young people.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

*Note: The above is based on the [author's article](#), published in *The British Journal of Sociology*. This article was first published at [British Politics and Policy at LSE](#). It gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

About the author

Jennie Bristow – Canterbury Christ Church University

Jennie Bristow is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Canterbury Christ Church University. She is the author of [Baby Boomers and Generational Conflict](#) (Palgrave Macmillan 2015), [The Sociology of Generations: New directions and challenges](#) (Palgrave Macmillan 2016), and co-author of [Parenting Culture Studies](#) (Palgrave Macmillan 2014).



-