

Boomers: From Adorable Baby Bulge to #BoomerRemover

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Over their lifetimes, the age cohort called *Boomers* experienced a weirdly constructed narrative arc. In childhood, they were viewed as adorable. (Tom Wolfe said in 1990 that “myth is not too pompous a word for the aura that shone ’round about them.”) But over their disparate and unequal lifetimes through the twenty-first century, the noun *Boomers* was applied to this group and intentionally politicized; the connotations markedly changed. Growing toward old age, they began to be treated as too numerous – a “tsunami” – and too expensive: unwanted and expendable.

Originally, the term *Baby Boomer* denoted an unusually large group of children born after World War II in the US (1946–1964). Over nineteen years, seventy-six million were born; by 2012, nearly eleven million had died, leaving some 65.2 million survivors (Pollard and Scommegna). This demographic “bulge” became an influential social-scientific concept.¹ Of all the age-cohort names contrived since then (Gen X, Z, Millennials), *Boomers* alone had both a demographic anchor and an economic rationale. The name *Boomers* originally chimed with the rebounding postwar economy.

Once the name existed, the media, commentators, marketeers, popular writers, and politicians came to treat a cohort that covers nineteen years of births as if it were homogeneous. This is nonsense empirically. Age cohorts include everyone, thus they are sociologically the most diverse. (Think only of the segmentation by gender, race, class, ethnicity, ableness, plus draft number, educational attainment, political attitudes.²) Events the members lived through “together” (Vietnam, elections, waning unionization, civil rights movements) were experienced very differently. The only thing they shared

¹ According to Bouk, the Census Bureau approved the 1946–1964 boundaries. But even before the US entered World War II, a rash of births inspired specialists and the mass media (*Life* magazine) to announce a “baby boom” (326). After 1966, the bulge actually grew with immigrants. Demography was an “infant” interdiscipline.

² In the United States at that time, men had to register for the military draft. Their local draft board gave out exemptions, mainly to those attending college. Others received a draft number by lot, which determined whether they would have to report for induction.

together was a mediatized life course in the late twentieth century that took them from adorable to expendable.

The “boom” years lasted long enough for the government to build schools, roads, housing, and in the 1960s, safety nets. The white workforce was unionized enough to provide full employment and rising wages for whites. Black Americans and women of all ages built movements for equality. When wages started to stagnate, however, the working populace became increasingly unequal. In about 1980, the economy began a long slide that continues, with crevasses (the recessions of 1981, 1984, 1991, 1998, 2001, and especially 2008) and showy peaks in the stock market.

The life narrative created treated the millions as if they had a single life-course, and even a single character arc. Group attributes could be attached and then forgotten. “War Babies. Spock Babies. Sputnik Generation. Pepsi Generation. Rock Generation. Now Generation. Love Generation. Vietnam Generation. Protest Generation. Me Generation” (Bouk, 338). I would add Hippies and Idealists. Soon politics or economics lurked in every label. In the 1980s, the entire group of then young adults was called “Yuppies,” even though only a minority were college-educated and upwardly mobile, or professionals; women increasingly joining the workforce hit glass ceilings. The cohort’s economic well-being was, on average, higher than that of their predecessors at the same age, but only for those disproportionately remaining single, having fewer children, and coupling childbearing with mother’s work (Easterlin et al).

“Yuppies” were recharacterized as *aging Boomers* when the youngest were not yet forty. Their future growth in income would have had to come from wage increases, but wages stagnated. In midlife, even double-income families found saving for retirement hard. Popular nonfiction treated them as formerly “idealistic agents of social change” who had with age grown ambitious, cut-throat, and more conservative politically. Gerontologist Harry Moody called these differing character ascriptions “The Boomer Wars.” People who were born later, the newer young, often referred to as “the Xers,” had been described as “slackers” when they first joined the economy--in contrast to the hard-working older group of Boomers (as I argued in 2004 in *Aged by Culture*). As recessions hit, manufacturing was outsourced overseas and the low-wage gig economy surged. During this period the “Xers” were re-described as the victims of *the Boomer’s* stranglehold on jobs, housing, and popular music.

“How the Baby Boomers Stole Their Children’s Future” (Reeves) was a representative title. The millions identified as *Boomers* became the scapegoats – blamed for the misfortunes of cohorts who had been born later into increasingly unfavorable economic circumstances.

To ease out midlife employees in favor of cheaper, and usually younger, workers, *the Boomers* were soon being considered “deadwood,” even as diversity-minded Human Resources directors touted them as loyal, usefully experienced, and focused. Job discrimination, best called “middle ageism” when it deletes people as young as forty or fifty, has become a fact of life, especially for women and people of color, despite the introduction of the 1967 Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) in the US, which made such practices illegal. Age discrimination worsened after the Long Recession of 2008; a large tranche of people were forced into premature retirement or long-term unemployment (Gullette, *The Public Health Emergency*). The bad press won so completely that the label became a libel that some resented: “I’m no Boomer!”

In 2022 legal filings revealed that IBM executives had discussed, over email, how to force out older workers, deriding them as “dinobabies” who should be made an “extinct species” (Kelly). Executives at the highest levels had eliminated thousands of employees over forty. IBM bosses were not ashamed to use hostile Darwinian evolutionary language against older employees, and they understood the strange neologism “dinobabies.”

The next political step was making this large group’s aging-toward-old-age mean and fatal. This was accomplished by conservatives who argued in the mainstream press and political debates that nation-states were unlucky if they had a longevity revolution. Older adults would become “a burden” that younger, working people (often referred to as “the nation”) could not afford to support. Despite being critiqued as “apocalyptic demography,” – there are simple solutions to keeping Social Security solvent – this belief was promoted to become, unfortunately, a very big and unavoidable story.

Noting that “[m]uch of the conservative literature on generational equity was published in the popular press rather than in academic journals,” Dan Bouk writes, “critics of the American welfare state now wielded the baby boomer crisis narrative like a weapon” (340). As early as 1984, deficit hawks had generously funded Americans for Generational Equity [sic]. In 2008, a man committed to privatizing Social Security committed \$1 billion to create

the eponymous Peter G. Peterson Foundation, to counter “the impending fiscal cliff” of retirement. Neoliberals touted “deficit reduction” in order to unravel the safety nets that take care of Americans medically (Medicare/Medicaid) and economically (Social Security). The lies of the “generational equity” discourse attempted to create anger and fear in younger adults who constantly heard that *Boomers*, incorrectly assumed to be well-to-do, were selfishly hoarding to deprive the young of a decent future. As Congress failed to fix Social Security, the young were mendaciously told that *Boomers* would use it up.

“OK Boomer,” said sarcastically, became a popular put-down via TikTok in 2019. It perversely made older individuals responsible for retrograde ideas and even global warming – the latest example of overwrought political content linked to age. Boomer-bashing became even uglier in spring 2020, when COVID-19 started killing mostly older adults and nursing home residents. The pandemic was greeted gleefully on social media as a #BoomerRemover.

So far, the mythicized *Boomer* babies have been uniquely unfortunate in popular characterizations of their life course. As they grew older, they, not the economy, were said to decline. This brief history shows how right-wing ideology and pop culture, in a particular country, in a particular historical and economic period, worked – reframing facts, hurting older adults’ self-image, and, among the young who believe the lies, creating their too eager anticipation of having older adults retire and nursing facility residents die off.

Some cultural wars (racism, sexism) have become increasingly visible. Ageism, which constructs people as they grow older as defective and inferior to currently non-old adults in various domains – is not as visible. So, the ways in which older adults are persecuted, seriously or jocularly, are underestimated.

Heretofore, the concept *Baby Boomers* had rarely been contested analytically. The label ought to be avoided. As should “Gen X” (X-er cohorts had no name or aggregate identity until 1991, when a Canadian novelist arbitrarily rounded up those born between 1965 and the early 1980s). The “X-ers” will be next in line for ageist job discrimination and, as they in turn near Social Security age, “burden” discourses. Ideally, scholars and journalists and teachers would historicize the nomenclature and deconstruct the attributes. Best would be rejecting all cohort labels for any age group, now and

henceforth, and with them the false fictional characterizations and aspersions about decline that naming makes possible.

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