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Blaming the Baby Boomers does today's young people no favours

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Author: Jennie Bristow

Lecturer in Sociology, Canterbury Christ Church University

A new report by the Ready for Ageing Alliance argues that we should stop assuming that all members of the Baby Boomer generation are healthy, wealthy, and idle, and holding them responsible for everything that is currently wrong with the world. Too right.

One of the nastiest narratives to have developed over the past decade is that of “boomer blaming”, where the alleged good fortunes of the generation born in the 20 years or so after World War II (definitions of the boomer generation vary, often according to what it is being blamed for) are presented as the cause of myriad social problems. Everything from environmental destruction to the problems of the economy, the housing market, the welfare state, youth unemployment and children’s mental health, has been laid at the Boomers’ door.

Boomer blaming is not just a whinge – it has a real policy impact. Former government minister David Willetts has gone so far as to accuse the Boomers of breaking the “intergenerational contract”. His book, *The Pinch*, is subtitled “How the Baby Boomers took their children’s future – and why they should give it back”.

Lobby groups such as the Intergenerational Foundation (IF) publish an “Intergenerational Fairness Index”, which directly counterposes the prospects of younger generations compared to older ones, and calls on the government to “embark on a programme of ‘intergenerational rebalancing’” – taking from Granny to give to Baby George.

The IF quotes Laurence Kotlikoff, professor of Economics at Boston MIT, claiming that: “The UK, like other developed economies, has engaged in fiscal, educational, health and environmental child abuse.”

The shrill hyperbole of boomer-blaming has left some quite bewildered. As the Ready for Ageing Alliance points out: “the term ‘Baby Boomer’ is increasingly used as a term of abuse”. In reality, the boomer cohort, like any other, contains a range of individuals living in a range of circumstances. Yes, some are well off, with stable pensions and appreciating housing assets – but others are poor, ill, unemployed, or unable to retire.

Why would we blame an entire cohort for having been born at a particular time in history? How could it benefit their children or grandchildren to be told that their future has already been “taken”?

Not *Absolutely* Fabulous

My study of Baby Boomers and generational conflict analyses the reasons behind all this blaming, by tracking how the media discussion has developed over the past quarter of a century. I found that, while the boomers have been of interest for some time, it is only in the past decade or so that they have been so clearly constructed as a problem. This has less to do with the actual characteristics or experiences of this generation, than with the way that society now understands social problems and their causes.

For example, one of the central charges levelled against the boomers is that, as a large generation, they have “monopolised” society’s resources: pensions, housing, and healthcare. But they have always been a relatively large generation (the clue is in the name) and, in different times, this would be seen as a good thing. More people can mean more wealth generation, more dynamism, a sense of greater possibility.

The current obsession with the size of the boomer generation is a result of limited economic and social policy outlook that is obsessed with sharing out the pie, rather than making a bigger pie. This approach is particularly tasteless when it comes to the boomers – who, having contributed to the pie through employment and taxation in their working years, are now seen as greedy in their attempts to access pensions or healthcare. That there has been a lively, and ongoing, discussion about euthanasia as one solution to the Baby Boomers’ enhanced longevity shows the grim logic of this kind of demographic determinism.

The other reason people have it in for the boomers is their cultural association with the 60s. Despite the fact that the majority of Boomers came of age in the crisis-ridden 1970s, our image of the generation as a whole seems to be taken directly from *Absolutely Fabulous*: selfish, narcissistic hedonists who have never had to do a day’s “real” work and rely on their long-suffering kids to cope with the reality of middle age.

Spirit of the 60s

In Britain 2015, the spirit of the 60s – experimentation, individualism, the freedom of youth – is seen as all very outré: the 60s has been recast as the era that brought us family breakdown, Jimmy Savile, and an interest in buying too much stuff. So the Boomers, just because some of them were there, are shunned like a smoker at a dinner party.

Yes, there was a lot of nonsense in the 60s – and periodic attempts to romanticise that era don’t get us very far. But rerunning the Culture Wars in a personalised fashion, against individuals who are still very much alive and playing a vital, responsible role in our society, is reprehensible. A critique of the 60s is one thing; the current Granny-bashing is an attack on old and young alike. It presents the recently retired as parasites – and the freedom of youth as something misguided and dangerous, to which today’s young people should not even aspire.

Solutions to the economic or cultural problems of today will not be found by rewriting the past and castigating those who happened to live there. We should be living in the present, and embracing the future.