

## *Renewing the Family: A History of the Baby Boomers*

by Catherine Bonvalet, Céline Clément, and Jim Ogg

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*Renewing the Family: A History of the Baby Boomers* represents a comprehensive examination of the baby boom generation in the context of family relations over the postwar period, charting the generation's entire life cycle with a French and British comparative analysis of the first wave of the boom.

This volume is part of a series of publications devoted to population studies and demography by the French National Institute for Demography (INED, Paris). The 2015 English version of the book is said to have some minor differences from the French edition, which was originally published in 2011. The authors, all based in France, are Catherine Bonvalet, a researcher at INED, Céline Clément, a researcher from Université Paris (Ouest Nanterre), and Jim Ogg a sociologist and researcher at Caisse Nationale D'Assurance Vieillesse (CNAV) in Paris.

This book is in the tradition of *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation* by Landon Jones (1980), *The Lyric Generation: the Life and Times of the Baby Boomers* by François Ricard (1994), and *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby-Boom Generation* by Doug Owrain (1996). The first book, *Great Expectations*, can be characterized as describing the American baby-boom generation from its babyhood until early adulthood, while the second can be described as an examination of the early wave of the baby boom and the societal changes in Canada, with an emphasis on the province of Quebec. The third book, *Born at the Right Time*, mainly documents the Canadian baby-boomers throughout their tumultuous youth, with an emphasis on its impact on society. *Renewing the Family* is the most ambitious of the group, as it attempts to document the early wave of baby-boomers (born 1945–1954) in their entire life cycle, namely babyhood, youth, and early, middle, and later adulthood. As well as covering such a large span of time, the book also attempts to place the baby boom in the context of changing family relations.

In its broad scope, this is an impressive book that documents demographic, sociological and historical facts in its attempts to uncover the origins of the postwar baby boom in France and England. It uses a comparative approach, with a mix of demographic and qualitative data; the latter are in the form of ninety detailed interviews, sixty from France and thirty from England. Most chapters weave the voices of the interviewees' life stories into the life cycle phases, giving life to the family experience. Though its emphasis is on France and the UK, there are some comparisons with the North American context.

The main premise of the book is to answer the question of whether the baby boom does indeed form one specific generation that clearly stands out. A second question examines whether the baby boom really transformed the family. Another related theme is the movement towards greater individualism. The first few chapters address the issues of what constitutes a generation and the baby-boom phenomenon. Bonvalet and her co-authors are certainly not the first to tackle this question. They make a very good attempt to offer an answer by discussing the sociological and demographic definitions of what constitutes a generation. They ponder over the origins of the baby boom itself, putting forward economic, political, and psychological reasons to explain the mystery of the expansive postwar recovery in the birth rate. The entire book represents their attempt to

answer the generation question, with the remaining chapters ordered according to the baby-boomers' own lives, beginning with childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, with an emphasis on family formation, professional life, and finally current family relations.

Placing the baby-boom generation in the context of the times is crucial. Like Ricard (1994), the authors discuss the period of postwar prosperity, referred to as the *thirty glorious years*, and what role this new-found affluence played in the upswing in the postwar fertility rate. It was a prosperity boosted by the interventionist role of the state, as both the French and British governments embarked on ambitious reconstruction programs involving economic and social reforms. For example, one of the issues the authors discuss is the perilous state of the housing stock in post-war France, and the efforts to rebuild.

Bonvalet and her co-authors echo Owram (1996) in noting that the harbingers of social change were already present in the late 1950s. They point out that indeed the young people were the cultural movers and shakers but conclude that the baby-boomers were picking up from where their parents had left off. In essence, the baby boomers did not cause change but they were “the ones who provided the momentum—and who stole all the limelight,” all the while “lending the movement its statistical size and historical importance”. Another area of note covered in this book is the May 1968 student protest movement in France, which represented a pivotal moment in the nation's history. This critical event is set in the context of the rise of individualism and the modernization of society.

The strength and major contribution of this book is that it places the baby boom in the context of the historical evolution of family life. For example, the authors note that family diversity is nothing new. In this context, the authors refer to the quote: “the nuclear family was just a blip on the screen.” The book gives much attention to women's lives, perhaps due to the fact that women's life cycles have undergone the most transformation in the postwar period. The authors discuss work and female identity, the sexual revolution as well changes in marriage and increasing rates of divorce and cohabitation. In effect, women's lives were no longer mapped out in advance; they now had a series of choices.

In the final few chapters, the authors consider the baby boomers as parents, noting that the boomers' own children are remaining dependent longer, often facing a difficult labour market and having their parents hyper-invested in their lives. In addition to caring for their children, the baby boomers are also attending to their elderly parents, earning the title of the *sandwich generation*.

One weakness of the book is that the concluding section is a bit of a disappointment. The final chapter, with the much-anticipated answer to their main thesis question—does the baby boom form a specific generation?—ends not with a bang but with a whimper, as the authors continue to dither on the definition of *generation*. In the end, Bonvalet and her co-authors agree that the baby boom is a specific *demographic* generation but waver on whether they form a *social* one. For the second question (did the baby boom transform the family?), they consider that the baby boomers have not *rejected* the family but have *renewed or re-invented* it. Despite this small drawback, overall this is an excellent book and makes for a compelling read. The authors make a valuable contribution in documenting the many changes in family structure over the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st century, with a detailed portrait of a large generation that went along for the ride.

## References

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