

**Book Review: Jennie Bristow, *Baby Boomers and Generational Conflict*. London: Palgrave, 2015. ISBN: 978-1137454737 (Hardback). 212 Pages. \$95.**

**Reviewed by Nicholas Birns<sup>1</sup>**

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No generation arouses more ire or invective than the Baby Boomers. Barack Obama (b. 1961), either a very late Boomer or very early Gen Xer, based his campaign in 2008 on transcending Boomer conflict; eight years earlier, George W. Bush ran on the basis of calling his own Boomer generation to accountability, responsibility, and greatness. In 2016, Bernie Sanders, too old by a few years to be a Boomer himself, became the champion of Millennials—some of them too young to even have Boomers as parents—by criticizing the compromises made by Hillary Clinton and her husband in 1990s as emblems of Boomer “cultural transformation and personal liberation” (3) corroded by complacency and corruption.

Indeed, in the US the Clintons have become so representative of the Boomer generation that one’s feelings about one are irretrievably colored by one’s feelings about the other. Thus it is salutary that Jennie Bristow’s informative and thought-provoking study is written by a scholar based in the UK and is largely premised on data from the UK public sphere. This helps a global audience see what is at stake more clearly without the distraction of ephemeral and parochial US concerns. Bristow makes clear from the beginning that she is determined to read beyond the public-sphere stereotypes of the Boomers’ significance. She decries a “deliberate strategy to articulate (and indeed foment) a conflict between generations” (5) on the part of prominent political, media, and corporate

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actors, and wonders what is at the bottom of all this. Is it that the Boomers were felt to be so privileged and entitled in Bristow's words "degenerate hedonists" (3) that they have now become scapegoated?

Sagaciously, Bristow goes back into the history of the very idea of generations, whose modern incarnation begins in Germany with the sociologist Karl Mannheim. Mannheim, according to Bristow, was interested in generations as a mode of understanding the way in which "knowledge is transferred across time and space." Mannheim rejected the merely demographic ideas of generation proffered by positivism, which was only interested in mechanistic variables such as birth rate, for a broader, more heuristic and affective idea of the particular moral values of a cohort of people. He avoided, though, an excessive "introversion" of the "purely qualitative" (33). Bristow then goes on to discuss José Ortega y Gasset and the later US historian of generations Robert Wohl, noting that for both thinkers, a generational consciousness was linked with the onset of modernity. In the twentieth century, when society itself seemed in crisis and every generation seemed "radically changed" (34), human identity itself seemed variable, generationally inflected.

The Baby Boomers, at least in the US and the UK, grew up in a world that had seemed to dodge the crises of modernism, when as UK Prime Minister Harold Macmillan boasted in 1959, "You've never had it so good." When first recognized by society, they were identified as privileged by their youth and good fortune. Bristow quotes the British historian Dominic Sandbrook, who has written superbly of this era in British history, and who called the Boomers "the luckiest people in history" (90). Yet Bristow goes on to say that this "privileged cohort" (91) in fact was an amalgam of people from many class, social, and ethnic backgrounds. There is thus an illusory cohesiveness to generations, for all the force of shared experience and existential conditions. This becomes urgent when the Baby Boomers' "luckiness" remains at "the heart of this cultural script" (78), all the more so now that they are approaching old age and are less a symptom of gilded youth than "the focus of contemporary society's anxiety about 'ageing'" (78).

People today are often discouraged from identifying with their race, gender, class, or ethnicity. Identity politics are often critiqued on the Right, yet they also come in for a heavy dose of invective from the Left, beginning, perhaps, with the writings of the later Richard Rorty. Though some aspect of contemporary Left discourse, such as queer politics or the practice of an intersectional feminism, manages to use identity politics in a sophisticated and constructive manner, many leftist thinkers have seen identity politics as a cul-de-sac of essentialism, irrelevant in a

multiracial, diasporic, and gender-fluid age. Generational identities have the advantage of appealing to how an individual feels rather than how they look or what their anatomy is, and this connection with affect is one of the factors that has made generational identity so appealing. Yet there are limits. Few would argue that the shared experience of watching *The Brady Bunch* on television, for instance transcended differences in race, class, linguistic background, and gender among Americans born in the 1960s.

But in an age of post-identity politics, in the fragmented arena of what Zygmunt Bauman has termed “liquid modernity,” generational identities are going the other way and are hardening. That might be because, despite their biological basis in what Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life” and what Hannah Arendt termed “natality,” they seem to offer a less bounded and organic definition of what it is to be human. To say that one is a Millennial seems so much more liberating than to say one is female, queer, or Latino. Part of this is because Millennials are not the objects of prejudice. In the US, Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, for instance, did not find that their Millennial identity protected them from racially inflected violence any more than it did their Gen X or Boomer predecessors. Bristow raises the specter of whether neoliberalism is using the allure of looser, more liquid generational categories to try to diminish awareness of continuing injustice along racial, gender, and class lines. By mounting “a simplistic narrative that blames older people for the myriad problems of the present day” (6), cultural elites, Bristow argued, have shifted the blame for the inequality and alienation that plague the contemporary social sphere on an easily caricatured generation. But, she argued, the greatest negative consequence of this is the way a scenario is imposed on younger people that prevails over their ability to “exert an influence of their own” (190) and “create their own future.” In order for this to happen, Bristow insists, the slogans of generational identity must be complicated, even as she continues to value the heuristic potential of generational analysis. This palpable yet nuanced conclusion is characteristic of this accessible, vigorously argued book, which, despite its British orientation, can find its arguments applied worldwide.

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