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# Age war as the new class war?

Contemporary representations  
of intergenerational inequality

*Susan Pickard*

# Newspaper and media influence

- In the UK the media has played a very significant role in shaping increasingly entrenched consensus around intergenerational inequity.
- The media is also significant in shaping public attitudes towards older age groups
- Before 2008 this centred on 'burden' discourses
- After 2009 emphasis switched to negative representations of third agers in terms of privilege
- Individual columnists are very significant claims-makers and particularly in the 'progressive' media

# Why is old(er) age a problem?

- Cultural antipathy to ageing and old age is integrate to modernity
- Age ideology and ageism permeates our intellectual tradition
- Narrative of 'progress' favours youth
- This kind of discrimination is underplayed or overlooked in sociological sttudies

# Age System

- Operates through a relational hierarchy of ages and stages with prime of life adulthood at the top
- Operates through the framework of the life course which organises groups according to seemingly 'natural' attributes and norms and based on a narrative of growth/stasis or stability/decline
- In late modernity, greater fluidity/permeability is structured by emphasis on the neoliberal subject (associated with the youthful 'productive' self)
- 'Old age' now third age/fourth age

# Methodology

- Rhetorical and figurative approaches
- Focused on Guardian and Telegraph initially between 2014-2017
- In the Guardian (and other progressive publications) the weight of the depiction of this theme fell on blaming especially the 'third age'
- This emerged through four themes
- I was also interested in the tenor of the discourse and the language used and noted the use of emotive rhetoric and binary couplets
- Star commentators but also regular columnists
- I have updated this for newspaper reports on age war and covid during 2020

# Terms used to describe old and young respectively in Guardian newspaper

## OLD

Brazen  
Conservative  
Hoarding  
Rejoicing  
beggars  
Stupid  
Grey power  
Social arthritis  
Gilded  
Past  
Selfish  
Short sighted  
Leisurely  
Gerontocracy

## YOUNG

Clobbered  
Precariat  
Shafted  
Institutionalised  
  
Self-loathing  
Jilted  
Adaptability  
Struggling  
Future  
Mentally Ill  
Stressed  
Busy  
Marginalized

# Theme 1: greater political influence

- ‘brazen defence of the old at the expensive of the young’
- ‘young people have been disproportionately clobbered’
- ‘Austerity... is predominantly a young person’s game’
- ‘EU Referendum results: young ‘screwed by older generations’ as polls suggest 75% backed remain’ : ‘Thanks Granny’
- ‘The young versus baby boomers: the Peasants’ Revolt of our age?’
- ‘I’m ashamed of my own mother’: many ‘millennials’ feel that the older generation has selfishly voted against the interests of subsequent ones.

As many as 7 in 10 pensioners will  
vote Tory....



# Family rifts over Brexit: 'I can barely look at my parents'



# Theme 2: material advantages

- ‘No pay rise? Blame the baby boomers’ gilded pension pots’
- ‘Pensioners living in golden era as income outstrips workers’
- ‘Dramatic increases in house prices have locked out younger buyers. Does the baby boomer generation now enjoy an unfair level of property wealth’?
- ‘Older people have pulled up the ladder’
- ‘It’s time for Britain’s millionaire pensioners to pay up’
- Thank you, younger generation – for keeping us oldies in pocket

Does the baby boomer now enjoy an unfair level of property wealth?



# Pensioners living in a golden era...



# Theme 3: Psychological dimensions

- Having enjoyed a life of free love, free school meals, free universities, defined benefit pensions, mainly full employment and a 40-year-long housing boom, they are bequeathing their children sky-high house prices, debts and shrivelled pensions. A 60-year-old in 2010 is a very privileged and lucky human being – an object of resentment as much as admiration’ (Hutton, 2010).
- ‘Someone needs to fight the selfish short-sighted old’ (Huhne, 2013)
- ‘Why are the baby boomers desperate to make millennials hate ourselves?’

‘Born into a bizarre world controlled by baby boomers who have comprehensively shafted us, it’s a credit to our resilience and adaptability that we’ve managed to get this far at all’



Millennials see themselves as greedy, self-absorbed and wasteful, study finds



# Theme 4: Age war replacing class war

‘Here’s a nightmare for those of us who want a more just and equal society: the right, in Britain and the rest of Europe, finds a strategy for eternal political dominance: in an ageing society it simply nurtures the support of the older generation, securing the votes of an expanding, highly politically engaged demographic . The young, it abandons...’ (Jones, 2016)

‘ It’s time for young people to step up and reject the turd sandwich of a world that is stopping us from being happy and healthy. The odds are stacked against us, but we have to try, if only so we don’t inflict the same needless woe on our children that our parents inflicted on us.’

‘Just as the aristocrats of old insisted that a population devastated by the Black Death should pay customary dues and higher taxes, so the old today still insist that the impoverished youth fund the equivalent – the pensions, welfare and healthcare of the elderly’



# Age war and the covid-19 pandemic

- Older people more at risk from Covid-19 (especially oldest old)
- But older people have been represented as not suffering any consequences from lockdown and even managing to profit economically (unlike the young)
- Lord Sumption in The Times about lockdown: 'If all this is the price of saving human life, we have to ask whether it's worth paying.'
- Max Hastings, again in The Times: older people are 'a dead weight upon the health system' and 'the past' not 'the future'.
- Right-wing anti-lockdown papers especially The Telegraph have summoned up the spirit of age war in their arguments

# Left wing papers response to covid

- The Guardian has used age-war more sparingly than in previous crises
- BUT: 'advantaged boomers' increasingly runs through the depiction of the experience of (i) housing in Covid-19 (lockdown conditions); (ii) the economic effects

# ‘Boomers are already dreaming of escape to the post-Covid sun’

- The “wrong kind” of older, or middle-aged, people are supposed to be receiving the Covid vaccine by the end of March. Not the truly elderly, the vulnerable shielders, but the other lot – taking us to the 32m total who are fiftysomething and above. All those boomers/generation Xers, unleashed back on to streets and into shops, waving their Covid-secure passes, perhaps to book themselves some well-earned YOLO hols.

Meanwhile, younger generations may feel left behind in more ways than one. And there’s the looming problem: the vaccine is the great liberator, but it rather depends what you’re getting liberated into, especially if you’ve no money or prospects. Could it give youth yet another reason to resent their elders for their perceived easier ride?’

# Some more examples

## Covid-19 exposes stark generational housing divide, UK report says

Young more likely than old to be locked down in overcrowded homes with no garden, says study

- [Coronavirus - latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



# 'Gilded postwar generation...'

Coronavirus

When the coronavirus crisis is over, Britain owes its young people a decent future  
*Polly Toynbee*



Fri 17 Apr 2020 08.00 BST

1,181 1,263

The gilded postwar generation must foot the bill for this crisis - not those already heavily indebted and lacking opportunities

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# Broader consequences

- Covid has been associated with ongoing ageism in the media and a strengthening of ageism in social media
- A very popular meme that began circulating among young people March 2020 includes the reference to covid being a 'boomer-remover'
- A study of a random sample of twitter found that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the tweets (containing the terms covid and old age/boomer etc) ridiculed older adults; 1 in 10 suggested their lives were less important (Xiang et al, Journals of Gerontology, 2020)

# Gendered aspects to this 'age war'

- The life course is gendered
- When Laslett constructed his third age as a category defined against the fourth age he did so without reference to gender and thus did not note that the third age was more likely to be enjoyed by men just as the fourth age was mostly male
- This gendering has intensified in late modernity
- Higgs and Gilleard have recently called for replacing 'ageism' with 'social imaginary of old age' reflecting a real ontological/ existential fear
- I suggest rather that it is both a combination of ageism and misogyny that particularly lie behind these representations

# Source: the 'Great Mother'

- Following Erich Neumann (2015 [1963]), this trope is represented in statues, paintings and other images through the ages
- Two faces: the Good Mother and the Terrible Mother (but both often turn into the other)
- Barbara Creed (1993) has described these as woman-as-monster and woman-as-victim
- Terrible Mother often appears as the 'witch' trope
- These can explain the representations of both the third age and fourth age as problematic (in different ways)

# Baby boomers don't deserve to be punished





# Concluding thoughts

- ‘When we're reading stories of zimmerframes being thrown on bonfires and bombs underneath mobility scooters we will know there is blood on the hands of the Guardian’
- ... Those who gain from these discourses are not the young but all who benefit from a scaled down social infrastructure
- These discourses seem to be hardening
- Potentially reduces the likelihood of a social policy towards ageing equipped to meet the challenges of super-ageing society
- It is therefore deeply conservative
- Also indicates the degree to which gender equality as a norm seems to have an expiry date in life course terms

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# Age War as the New Class War? Contemporary Representations of Intergenerational Inequity

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## Abstract



This paper examines intergenerational justice discourses that feature prominently in both