



## Introduction

In the current context of ageing populations, the immediate post 1945 birth cohorts occupy a crucial place. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, these individuals were all situated around the age that has for many years been associated with retirement. The moment has come for many of them to think about a new stage in the life course, at a time when uncertainties exist about the future of pensions and income sources in retirement. These issues may not be new, but the current birth cohorts that are experiencing them are very different to previous generations of retirees. They belong to the baby boom, which in addition to the demographic fact of belonging to an unusually large birth cohort of the years following the Second World War is associated with a radical change in lifestyles and aspirations. The baby boomers have experienced first-hand this rapid social change and they themselves have been the driving force of these transformations.

The baby boomers, defined here as the birth cohort of 1945–1954, have lived through an unprecedented half-century that has seen the explosion of consumer culture and different forms of ‘mobility’. They grew up in an era when the car became a common household consumption item and as adults have witnessed and designed the information technologies which have permeated all forms of social life. These developments have created societies characterised by movement, to the extent that some commentators evoke the emergence of

a *homo mobilis* or urban nomad (Iyer, 2000). The baby boomers are at the vanguard of these changes, showing themselves to be a generation on the move, eager to reap the maximum benefits from consumer society, to travel and participate in leisure activities as long as their health permits.

If the baby boomers are above all a mobile generation, this mobility extends beyond the spatial dimension to family life, no longer (if it ever was) the uncomplicated stable union of a couple and the nuclear family. The baby boomers have pushed, and some might say too far, the boundaries of individualism to the extreme. They have experimented with alternative lifestyles and have legitimised new forms of family life such as cohabitation before marriage, separation and divorce. Many have redefined gender relations and sought to make them more egalitarian both in the private and public spheres. And as they move through the life course, it seems as though for some the very idea of growing old is unacceptable. After having challenged and transformed many of the staging posts in the life course, how will the baby boomers approach the remaining years of life?

This book seeks to address these issues—of mobility, rapid social change and the life course—in the context of the ageing of the baby boom generation. The starting point is a presentation of some of the key characteristics of the 1945–1954 birth cohort in a European context, with a particular emphasis on the improvement of housing conditions and the spread of home ownership. We briefly trace the post-war rise in birth rates that were common to many European countries, the social conditions under which the baby boomers grew up, their arrival into adulthood and the emergence of youth culture and mass consumerism, and their passage through the first fifty or so years of adulthood. This is followed by several illustrations, again in a European context, of how the dramatic improvements in housing conditions and the spread of home ownership has led to new types of mobilities, ranging from the acquisition and use of second homes to extended time spent outside of a main residence and the practice of ‘double-residence’.

The focal point of the book is an analysis of the narratives of 60 individuals born between 1945 and 1954 living in London and Paris. These individuals participated in semi-structured interviews, mostly undertaken in their own home, between March and August 2006. At that time, almost all the participants were in their fifties. In Chapter 2, we present some details of the four selected areas in which the

interviews took place—Islington and Southwark in London, the 11th *arrondissement* and Montrouge in Paris. All of these areas have been subject to gentrification and the baby boomers have played an important role in this process. The local context of these densely populated urban areas is crucial for understanding the housing tenure trajectories of the baby boomers and the link between residential and social mobility, which are explored in the Chapter 3. A key theme in this chapter is that residential choices and mobility correspond to strategic choices made over the life course, and that the evolving trajectories will influence future residential choices as the baby boomers age.

Chapter 4 traces the mobility of the baby boomers from a spatial perspective, focussing on the routes that migrants to the city took in their youth and the process of gentrification in which many had an active part. ‘Pioneers of gentrification’ are distinguished from local inhabitants in order to show how different types of residential trajectories influence the ‘embeddedness’ of the baby boomers in their neighbourhood. Patterns of holidays and the use of second homes—two key areas of mobility—are also examined in this chapter. Chapter 5 switches to a different form of mobility but one that is highly associated with residential trajectories—the work histories of the baby boomers and the imminent transition to retirement. The final chapter brings together the different types of mobilities experienced by the baby boomers and examines the consequences on future projects and whether the city is, or will be, an attractive location in which to grow old.

Throughout the book, the tension between uniformity and diversity is present in every aspect of the baby boomers’ trajectories. The debate on whether the baby boomers share a common identity or whether they are a heterogeneous birth cohort has occupied a central place among sociologists. Much of this debate has been fuelled by survey data on the economic behaviour of the baby boomer generations, but there have been fewer in depth studies of their behaviour and attitudes. The analysis presented here seeks in part to address this gap and that is why we have paid particular attention to the presentation of the narratives of the baby boomers interviewed. We hope that it shows clearly how the baby boomers have common characteristics but at the same time are a highly, diversified group that continue to be stratified along gender and social class lines.

The tension between uniformity and diversity is accentuated by the comparative approach that forms a central part of the analysis.

Although the British and French baby boomers have experienced similar social transformations, the pace and institutional contexts have not been the same. These differences are highlighted in the urban populations that we have studied, and are especially visible concerning public housing policies, the availability of the private rental sector, labour market specificities and older workers, and cultural dimensions linked to the home and family life. At the risk of adding a further layer to the heterogeneity of the baby boomers, we hope that this comparative aspect to the baby boomers experience of urban life adds richness to the monograph.

Finally, we are aware of the limitations of our research and the fact that the populations we studied share certain characteristics—being mainly middle class and living in gentrified city areas—that are atypical for the general population of individuals in the same birth cohort. This fact, of course, restricts the generalisability of the results. But the variety of trajectories and life experiences of the 60 baby boomers interviewed resonate the many issues that this generation currently face as they begin to enter into a new life stage. We hope that many readers who themselves are a part of this generation discover similarities that unite them to our interviewees as well as differences that separate them. And we hope too that readers from other generations may find that the trajectories of our interviewees have something in common with those of their parents and children.