

Opinions

How 'baby boomers' took over the world

By **Landon Y. Jones** November 6 at 2:33 PM

Landon Y. Jones is a former managing editor of People magazine.

“What about calling it “The Baby Boomers?”” I asked my publisher. It was 1980, I’d just finished a book about Americans born between 1946 and 1964, and I needed a title. Most generations pick up labels based on when they come of age — think the Lost Generation, the Greatest Generation, the Silent Generation or the millennials. What seemed most distinctive about this generation, though, was its overwhelming size, challenging every aspect of American life.

“Oh, no,” came my publisher’s quick answer. “No one knows what that means. It will confuse booksellers. They will shelve it under Child Care.” So I titled the book [“Great Expectations”](#) (Dickens be damned), tucking “the baby boom generation” into the subtitle.

I learned from an editor of the Oxford English Dictionary that “baby boomers” actually first appeared in The Washington Post’s Outlook section, in a 1977 essay about the future of the world economy. Since then, of course, it has taken hold, sticking longer than any other term — Rock and Roll Generation, Generation Jones — for the people born between the end of World War II and the early ’60s. The words have a playful, alliterative rhythm to them. They are bouncy iambic duometers.

“Baby boomers” has migrated to many other countries, often with the English intact, though it is not always directly related to a bulge in births. The Germans use the single word “babyboomers” to refer people born in the 1960s. Germany saw an uptick in births between 1954 and 1969, with a peak in 1964. But baby boomers are also the children born in those prosperous times, during a “boom” economy.

Similarly, in the Netherlands, “de babyboomers” are considered to be the lucky beneficiaries of the economic prosperity of the 1960s and 1970s. The designation has to do with coming of age at the right time. They enjoyed sex, drugs and rock-and-roll, took all the good jobs and are now retiring and becoming a burden on society. Consequently, they are viewed by other generations with suspicion at best and hostility at worst. The charismatic right-wing Dutch populist Pim Fortuyn, in his book “Babyboomers: Autobiography of a Generation,” criticized his own cohort with gusto. (Fortuyn was assassinated in 2002 for his anti-Muslim views, however, not his generational views.)

Even the French, who fight off pernicious Americanisms such as “fast food” and “supermodel,” have yielded to what they call “les baby-boomers,” defining them as the generation born from 1943 to 1959 that took to the streets of Paris during the student riots in May 1968.

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The Italians, conversely, see two groups of "baby boomers" — one born in 1937-1940 and the other in 1959-1964 — both products of economic booms. What distinguishes the Italian boomers are their ambitions, more than their numbers.

Some Chinese learn about the American baby boom in school, but they refer to their own baby booms as "baby tides," particularly those times when Chairman Mao Zedong encouraged births in the 1950s and during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. The recent return to [a two-child policy](#) in China may create a new baby tide, if not a tsunami.

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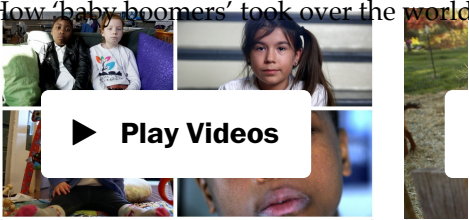
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