

---

*Transforming the Democratic Balance among State, Market and Society: Comparative  
Perspective on France and the Developed democracies*  
Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Harvard University, May 17-18, 2002

## **Social Generations, Life Chances and Welfare States**

Louis Chauvel

Sciences-Po Paris and Observatoire Français des Conjonctures Economiques (OFCE) and Observatoire Sociologique du Changement (OSC)

chauvel@ofce.sciences-po.fr

This short “protopaper” draws the main steps of my research on social generations, life chances, and transitions of welfare systems. Here, after a short presentation of my intentions, I will first define my object: the social generations. Then, the main hypotheses of the generational dynamics of society and their consequences on social welfare will be presented. Thus, I will dissect, in the French context, seven dimensions of the nowadays “generational fracture”. Therefore, I discuss, in a French-American comparison, the proximity and the differences of our societies. This protopaper is thus a short abstract of my book on social generations in France (Chauvel, 1998 [2002]), and an *esquisse* of the following one, on social generations in a comparative perspective.

### **0- Intentions**

The central intention, here, is to compare the American and the French welfare systems dynamics, and their consequence on the opportunities and difficulties that newer and older generations are facing. The commonsense hypothesis is that the rigid, languid and less market-oriented French system could be more pleasant for older generations, having accumulated onerous social rights and benefiting from large and costly social programs; conversely, the American welfare could be more hospitable with youth, because of lower level of unemployment, more open and welcoming labor market, and less rigid social construction. I am sorry for lack of the suspense, but the commonsense hypothesis is not really appropriate. Such a demonstration needs larger presentations of the social generation research agenda.

---

## 1- Definitions

In the Anglo-Saxon sociological vocabulary, “generation” is almost restrained to kinship and family issues when “cohort” is preferred for the definition of the group born at the same time (Ryder, 1965). In the American social science production, the syntagm “social generation” is almost nonexistent. If economists (Auerbach, Gokhale, Kotlikoff, 1994) use the notion of “generational accounting”, their birth cohorts are also embedded in family transmission relations. The European tradition is more open since we consider (Mentré, 1922; Mannheim, 1929) different senses, founding the idea of potential social structuration of cohorts.

Therefore, we should give the different definitions of generations, at least four. The first one will not be really considered here: the *genealogical generation* of the sociology of family and kinship. The three other are: demographic, social and historic generations (Mentré, 1922). The *demographic generation* is identical to birth cohort: the group of those born a given year, a very neutral clustering criterion. At the opposite, the *historical generation* is a set of cohorts defined by its common culture, shared interests, the consciousness of its specificity, and sometimes its conflicts against other generations: in France, a decisive example is the so called “*génération 1968*”, the first cohorts of the baby-boom (born between 1945 and 1955). The “*génération 1914*”, which entered adulthood during the first world war, is a more dramatic example. The opposition between historical and demographic generations defines an axe opposing high and low level of social structuration. *Social generation* is thus a cursor between the two opposite definitions. A social generation is a demographic generation sharing common social traits and patterns, but not necessarily the consciousness of its identity. The more it is structured and conscious of its own structuration, the more its political and historical mobilization could be obvious, and the more it could become a historical generation. We analyze demographic generations first, and a diagnosis in terms of historical generations results from the sociological analysis of its identity and the assessment of its structuration.

## 3- A theory of generational mutation of the welfare system

An aspect remains implicit here: the generation of generations. Socialization is the central process: during youth, between the end of school and the stabilization in the status of adult, occur a specific period of which the consequence could be decisive, the period of primary socialization, when roles and attitudes are learnt, first experience of life are faced. For social generations, the collective experience and the historical context that a generation meets when it is twenty is therefore crucial. Coming across *mai 1968* or *juillet 1914* at age twenty could imply tremendous dreams or injury, and could let durable scars. This first socialization is sometimes insufficient. For the structuration of a generation, the secondary socialization -- I mean the permanent process of experience actualization during adulthood --, should regularly recall, reproduce or prolong the first experiences or the founding elements of the involved collective generational patterns. If not, the generation identity is progressively blurred (Becker, 2000).





---

Phone Company, Nuclear electricity planing, health system, universities, etc.). Then, the first cohorts of the baby-boom are not a sacrificed generation. In 2000, 25 years after, at age 30, that proportion is quite stable (28%). The history of higher occupational groups expansion is not linear. The aggregated linear growth results from the expansion of this occupational group at later age groups, but not from expanding recruitment. The generational distribution of this growth shows that no progress in the access to the middle class has occurred for the young for the last 25 years.

The third lesson is the *hysteresis* effect: for a cohort which benefited earlier from a growth of skilled occupations recruitment, that improvement will positively impact its position at any older age. Concerning the growth of these occupational groups, for a given cohort, everything happens before age 30. The history of the French social structure is this one: cohorts born before 1935 are characterized by about 15% in higher occupational groups from age 30 to 55; for those born after 1945, the percentage is 25%. The growth is not linear but affects the shape of a footstep. Twenty years after the cohort born in 1945, that born after 1965 enjoys no improvement. We can generalize this observation: the cohorts entered in the labor force after 1975, which experienced the economic break and mass unemployment, have been the early victims of the new dynamics, and keep the long term scars of its difficult condition.

The fourth observation is that, now, for the first time in a period of peace, the situation of the new generation is worse than the condition of the youth of its own parents. In fact, the 1968 generation, born in 1948, is the children of those born in 1918 (the distance between genealogical generations is about 30 years), who were young adults in World War II, who worked in difficult conditions at the beginnings of the “Trente glorieuses”. The condition of the baby-boomers was incomparably higher than its parent’s. But the following genealogical generation, born about 1978, which is now less than 25 years old, faces less stimulating opportunities of growth, notably because they are now the children of a golden generation.

The fifth message is that, for the newer generation, we notice an exceptional risk of dyssocialization. I mean that the main problems of generational transmission comes from problematic correspondence between the values and ideas that a new generation receives from the previous one and the facts it will experience. That problematic correspondence is the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The baby-boom generation have been socialized with the values of its parents: scarcity and abnegation, that it parents had known during the hard times of the thirties, but it experienced the golden age and the period of fast growth which offered comfort and opportunities of emancipation for the masses. Here is not the most problematic situation, but the opposite one, for the young generation of nowadays who is socialized by parents who experienced fast growth and the emergence of the consumption society, but who rediscover times of shrinking opportunities, of scarce positions in society and the like. For the new generation who benefit from longer education, and higher diplomas than its own parents, the broad devaluation in social and economic terms of their improved educational assets could produce unclear results. The psychosocial difficulties of the new generation (notably: suicide, violent behavior, incivilities of many kinds, etc.) can not be intelligible without that factor.

The sixth point concerns the transmission of our social model to the next generations. Apparently, social and structural reforms affects the whole population and involves period

---

---

social change. In fact, social welfare, and the welfare state, change with the succession of cohorts: when we have created the retirement system, in 1946, we have decided that wage earners had to participate during 30 years of annuities to the system, for gaining access to a full rate pension. Thus, those who were yet at age 35 or more, who were born before 1910, were massively excluded from the new system. At the opposite, today, the new generation leaves school at age 21, loses 3 years in unemployment, freelance work or any kind of non standard activities and begins their participation to the system at age 24. If we add 40 years (the nowadays rules) or 45 (the projects of the French employers union), we discover that our nowadays system of early retirement (at average age 58) is yet ruined because the next generations of pensioners will not benefit from the present-day system. Any other aspect of the welfare system could be analyzed that way (social expenditures for families, health system, education, etc.). In fact, our equalitarian system of large homogeneous middle class of wage earners, which have culminated with the generations born during the forties, disappears within a dynamics of middle class shrinking experiences by the newer generations.

A seventh section here relates to the political representation of the generations, not in terms of values but of access to political decisions. In 1982, the average age of trade unioners and politicians owning a mandate was 45 years old; in 2000, it had jumped to 59. At the *Assemblée Nationale* (the French Congress), in 1983, 29,5% of the *Deputés* were 45 years old or less, and 12% in 1999. The political generation which emerged with the evens of 1968 and the following years, who entered early in the highest spheres of the political system during the end of the seventies and the eighties, is now settled down for a long time, and no new political generation could emerge yet. The age homogeneity of the politicians is now impressive and the question of the transmission of the political heritage quite unasked. Then, the specific life conditions of nowadays youth are out of the direct and personal experience of politicians and managers.

The first problem is the generational transmission. Many institutions are led by a homogeneous group of baby-boomers which will be retired in ten years, and nothing is done to provide or to feed a new generation of successors. In the next ten years, in many institutions, the risk of emergence of generational micro-struggles is high. The second problem is a question of long term decision. Many long term choices are made by those for who the life horizon is shorter; the generations in situation to support the long term consequences of these options are not associated to the elaboration of the choice of their future. In some decades, the social contract between generations could thus be denounced by those who have been sacrificed by these choices.

### **5- France and the US: two welfare systems?**

These elements could demonstrate that France is an exotic country where the civil society, the political culture and the socioeconomic organization are in a quite deplorable condition. A more flexible country, where seniority is less systematically valued, where the different cohorts are competing in an open market, where the conditions of political bargaining could provoke a faster circulation of political generations and *élites*, could avoid these difficulties.

---



---

The general result of this specific cohort distribution of educational asset is decisive: in the USA, from the fifties to the seventies, any newer generation holds better educational resources than older ones. For the last two decades, the educational growth of the newer generations has been stalling, when the elders have followed their own dynamics of progress - - because it is almost impossible to confiscate their qualifications to those who have met the historical possibilities to demonstrate that they could obtain it. We can not remove their qualification of doctor of medicine to the physicians who, given the difficult nowadays conditions of access to the PhD, would not gain it in our time.

Now, the seniors have never been, comparatively to the young, in better educational positions. This differential has clear consequences on the occupational, wage and income distribution between cohorts. Poverty rates grow faster in the young generations. Middle and higher skilled occupational groups stalls for the young and not for older cohorts. Little catch up dynamics occur for the cohorts of which the beginnings are nor favorable. The three first factors we have underlined for France could have similar consequences in USA. The realm of LTGP law is not the USA, where we find the objective expression of a generational fracture. The life chances of the generations born after 1955 have been clearly reduced.

A major issue in the American socio-economical evolution is the last two decades growth of wage and income inequality. In France, the generational dynamics of the different social strata are similar: at the top as at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the conditions of declining expectations are common, compared to the early baby-boom generation. In the USA, for the young generations, the highest classes enjoy exceptionally better positions when the median classes stall and the poor are submitted to unknown conditions of relative deprivation, if not absolute. Thus, in France and in the USA, the general dynamics are quite similar, if we do not consider the highest social strata. The major similarity is that, when we consider the average situation, the new French and American generations benefit from no progress when the older did. The distinction is that, in France, the new generation is homogeneously submitted to this rule, when in the USA, for the young generation, the rich and the poor know more and more divergent conditions. For those in the best economic situations, progress is ever possible when for the trash, the social condition is remarkably depressed. The questions are: will the French young elite continue to sustain a system where their condition is ever devaluated compared to the elder one? Will the French poor accept an even less esteemed condition? This last question should be addressed in the American case too.

But the main conclusion is this one: because they do not consider seriously the cohort dynamics of the welfare state, have myopic descriptions of the cohort's life chance evolutions, and are obsessed by short term considerations, emergencies, and illusions, the welfare state *réformateurs* ignore their decisions could have initiate less therapy for the whole society than shock for the next generations.

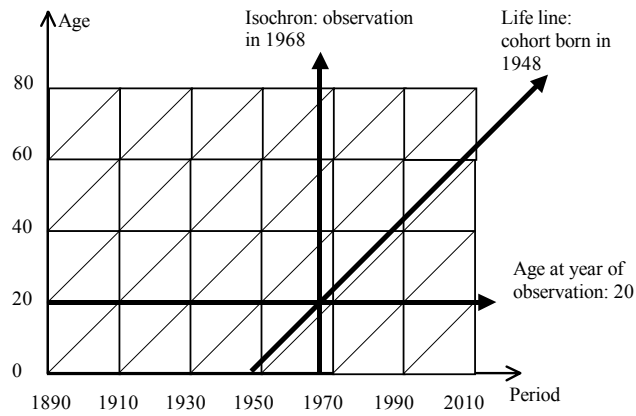
**Some references:**

---

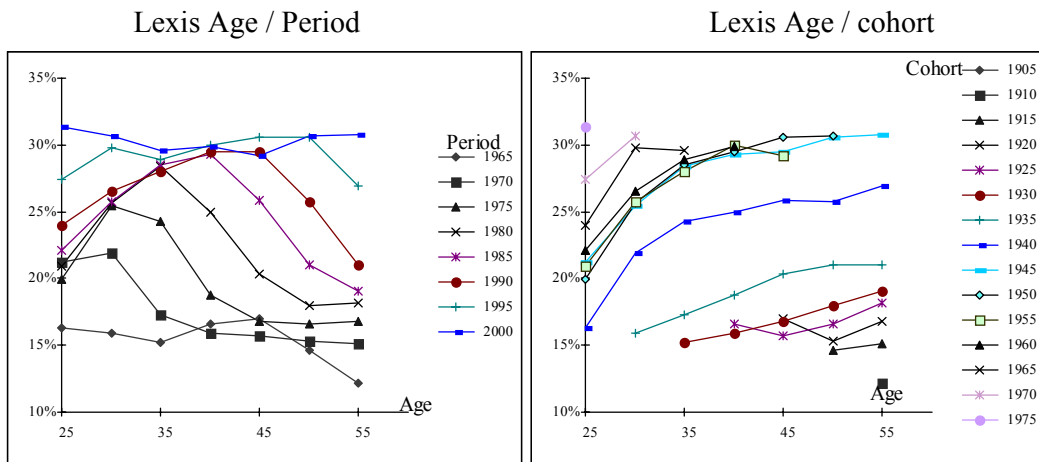


- 
- Auerbach A.J., J. Gokhale, L.J. Kotlikoff, 1994, *Generational Accounting: A Meaningful Way to Evaluate Fiscal Policy (in Symposia: Generational Accounting)*, The Journal of Economic Perspectives, Vol. 8, No. 1., Winter, 1994, pp. 73-94.
- Becker H.A., 2000; "Discontinuous Change and Generational Contracts". Pp. 114 - 132 in: S. Arber, C. Attias-Donfut (Eds), *The Myth of Generational Conflict. The Family and State in Ageing Societies*, Routledge, London /New York.
- Card D. et T. Lemieux, 2000 : « Can falling supply explain the rising return to college for younger men? : a cohort-based analysis », *NBER working paper series*, n°7655.
- Chauvel L., 1999 [2<sup>e</sup> ed 2002], *Le destin des générations: structure sociale et cohortes en France au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.
- Esping-Andersen G., 1990, *The Tree Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Freeman R.B., 1976, *The overeducated american*, New York, Academic Press.
- Mentré F., 1920, *Les générations sociales*, Paris, Éd. Bossard.
- Mannheim K., 1990(1928), *Le problème des générations*, Nathan, Paris.
- Ryder N.B., 1965, « The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change », *American Sociological Review*, 30, pp. 843-861.
- Thernstrom S., 1973, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.).
-

### 1-Lexis diagram

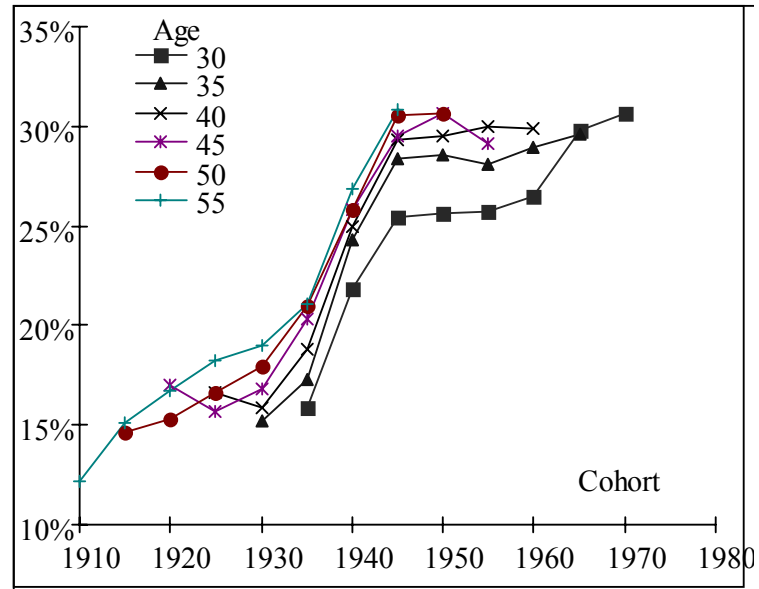


### 2- Proportion of service class positions (« cadres et professions intermédiaires ») by age and cohort



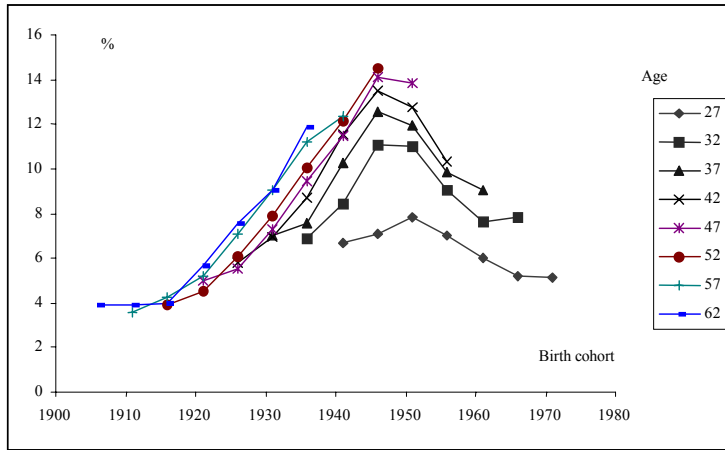
Source : compilation Enquêtes FQP - Enquêtes Emploi (1964-2000).

### 3- Proportion of service class positions (« cadres et professions intermédiaires ») by age and cohort : cohort diagram



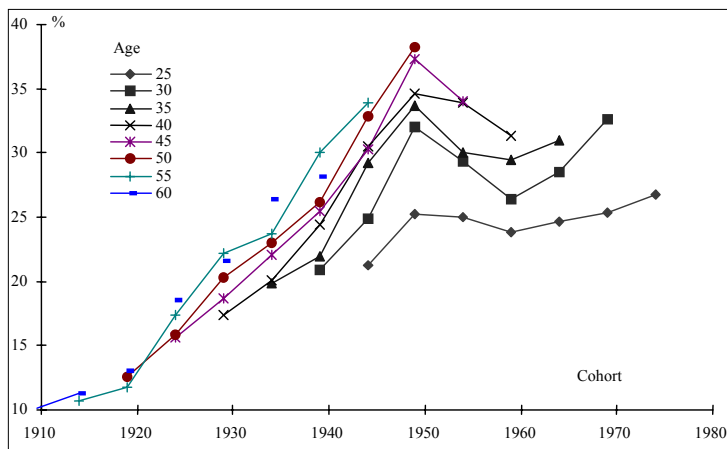
Source : compilation Enquêtes FQP - Enquêtes Emploi (1964-2000).

**4- Master's degree (or more) in the US male population (cohort diagram)**



Source : US CPS 1968-1999 cumulative file ; male population; N=956 940.

**5- Bachelor's degree holders (or more) in the US male population (cohort diagram)**



Source : US CPS 1968-1999 cumulative file ; male population; N=956 940.