

7 Social Generations, Life Chances and Welfare Regime Sustainability¹

Louis Chauvel

Published in : *Changing France : the politics that markets make* / edited by Pepper D. Culpepper, Peter A. Hall, Bruno Palier, Basingstoke (New York) Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

The generational sustainability of welfare regimes is of central importance to most long-term analyses of welfare state reforms (see for example: Esping-Andersen *et al.*, 2002). In an ideal society, individual contributions to social welfare are supposed to be counterbalanced by expected benefits, but in reality there are structural disequilibria, notably between generations. Contemporary social reforms are designed to correct such imbalances, but the rewriting of the contract between generations could cause more harm than good. Here, the analysis of the generational disequilibria in France could be useful: French society faces severe generational non-linearities and inequalities, the consequences of which could be the long-term destabilization of the contemporary welfare regime.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the concept of “social generation” as it relates to the analysis of the distribution of well-being, and to compare American and French welfare regime dynamics. Incidentally, the French case is not unique in its generational imbalances, since the American one faces major generational imbalances too. In previous publications on the impact of economic fluctuations from the “*Trente glorieuses*” (1945-1975) to the

¹ I wish to acknowledge the helpful comments and useful questions that I received from participants at the Harvard and Paris conference, especially those from Peter Hall, who offered several salient and patient remarks and corrections on previous drafts of this paper, and also Victor Chen for his useful comments and generous linguistic revision of this paper.

“*Croissance ralentie*” (1975-today) and their social consequences,² I have shown the existence in France of a generational rift (“*fracture générationnelle*”) between the generations born before 1955 (the early baby boom generations and the previous ones, who benefited most from the economic acceleration of the postwar period) and those born after 1955 (who are facing an economic slowdown, high youth unemployment, and the resulting social problems). Thus we find an “*insiderization*” of previous generations and an “*outsiderization*” of new ones. That “*fracture générationnelle*” is often denied by policymakers and in the public debate; however, the long-term implications of these generational dynamics could have major consequences for the stability of our welfare state. That fracture may be less visible than class, ethnic or gender inequalities, but it alters the long-term sustainability of the system. After defining “social generations”, and briefly discussing some theories of generational dynamics, I will analyze the consequences of macroeconomic changes in the context of strong social regulation on the opportunities of successive generations. I will first consider the different dimensions of the “generational fracture” in France and then discuss national specificities within a French-American comparison.

1- Definitions

The use of “generations” in European social science is more permissive than in the American academic context: for American sociologists, “generation” refers to the sociology of kinship and to family issues, while “cohort” (or “birth cohort”) refers to people born in the same year (Ryder, 1965). Therefore, in American academic journals, the expression “social generation” is quite uncommon (except in the discussions of Karl Mannheim’s theories). If some economists in the American tradition (Easterlin, 1966; Auerbach et al. 1994) write about “generations” and “generational accounting”, the birth cohorts they consider are also engaged in kinship relations of generational transmissions (gifts, education, legacy, etc.). The European tradition is different: we define (Mentré, 1922; Mannheim, 1929) “social generation” as

² France and the United States both experienced a period of post-war affluence: the American “Golden Age of capitalism” (Maddison, 1982) and the French “Trente Glorieuses” (Fourastié, 1979), which contrast with the subsequent period of economic slowdown and “diminished expectations” (Krugman, 1992). See, notably: Chauvel, 1998 [2nd ed. 2002].

specific groups of cohorts exposed to a common pattern of social change and/or sharing collective identity features such as ethnicity, gender, or class.

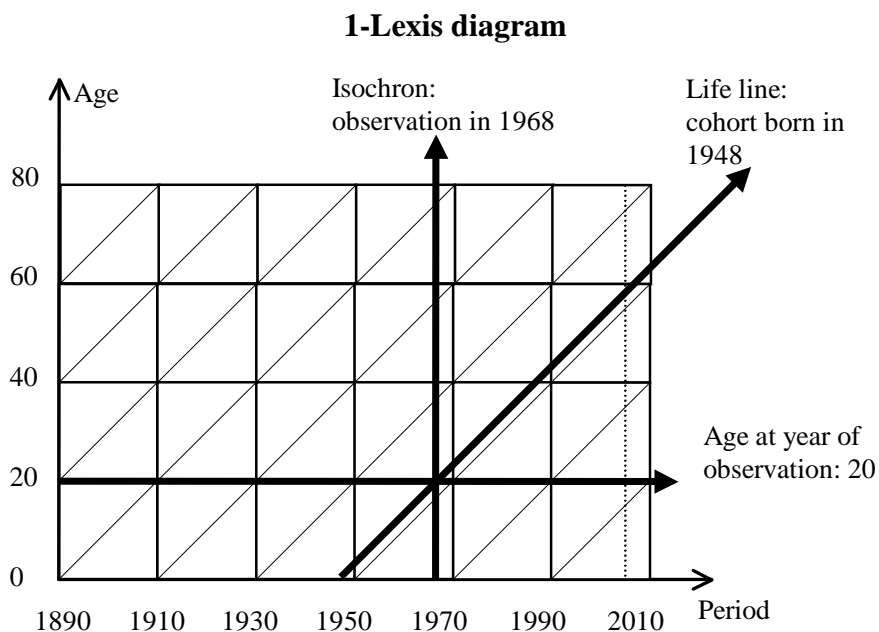
Historically, four definitions of “generation” exist (Mentré, 1922). The first one is less important to our argument: *genealogical generations* pertain to the sociology of family and kinship. The three others relate respectively to *demographic*, *social* and *historic* generations. A *demographic generation* is identical to a “birth cohort”: the group of individuals born in the same year. This is the most neutral clustering criterion that assumes no common trait. Conversely, the *historical generation* is a set of cohorts defined by a common culture, shared interests, consciousness of the generation’s specificity and its historical role, and occasionally conflict with other generations. A historical generation may define itself by the time of its coming of age in history: a decisive example is the so-called “*génération 1968*”, which refers to the first cohorts of the baby-boom (born between 1945 and 1950). The “*génération 1914*”, the generation of young adults of the First World War, is another dramatic example. *Social generation* is then defined as a link between these two polar definitions. In the empirical social sciences, we first look at demographic generations, and then we define historical generations from the results of sociological analysis, assessment and interpretation of the diversity or homogeneity of cohorts, as well as their objective and subjective identities and consciousness.

2- Process of generation replacement and social change

First we must look at “socialization” in general, without delving into a systematic theorization. During youth, between the end of school and the stabilization of adulthood, there is a specific period of “transitional socialization”, which is a pivotal point in the formation of individuals’ choices for the future: in a short period, usually some months, the potentialities offered by family and education turn into concrete positions from which people will construct their life courses. That individual process has collective consequences when a cultural or historical polarization has a “socialization effect” on most individual members of the new generation (Mannheim, 1929).

For people at age 20, collective historical experiences such as May 1968 or July 1914 could form durable opportunities or scars, since they face a major transition in their lives within a dramatic social or historical context. Children cannot completely participate yet, and

older people could be less affected, since they are already influenced by other experiences accumulated in other historical contexts (Ryder, 1965). This “transitional socialization” is not necessarily sufficient to create or promote durable generational traits: they need a continuous process of collective recall to reinforce the social generation’s identity that would progressively vanish otherwise (Becker, 2000).



Note: the Lexis diagram offers a synthetic view of the interactions of social times: when we cross periods, horizontally, and age, vertically, the time of cohorts appears on the diagonal ($a = p - c$). In year $p = 2005$, people at age 58 are born in 1948; they were 20 in 1968. At each period, young and old age groups are also different birth cohorts for whom socialization occurred in different contexts: the 75-year-old age group of 2005 (born in 1930) is also the “welfare generation” that has had abundant access to public pensions and health systems, while the same age group in period 1968 was the remains of the “sacrificed generation” born in 1893 (21 years old in 1914).

A major problem in generational social change analysis is the intersection of three social times: age, period and cohort. The most common time is “period” and pertains to the succession of historical epochs; the second time relates to “age” and the aging process; the third one is the *time of generations*, which consists of the continuous process of replacement

of elder cohorts by new ones. These three times are organized in a two-dimensional plane (see figure 1) that implies a profound indeterminacy. In any given period, different age groups coexist (defined by age thresholds, age statuses and roles), but they also represent different generations who have been socialized in different historical contexts. When we compare different age groups at a given date (period), we cannot know *a priori* whether their differences result from age or from generation: in year 2006, on the Lexis diagram, if the age group at age 58 (born in 1948) is at the top of income scale, we do not know whether it is an age effect (any cohort will enjoy better income at age 58) or a cohort effect (the 1948 cohort has faced the best career opportunities of the 20th century since its entry into the labor market). Age-period-cohort models have been developed to reveal generation effects, which can be discerned when specific traits appear in the “life line” of specific cohorts (Mason and *al.* 1973). These methods have been developed and improved in many different fields of social science: voting, values, literacy, labor force participation, mortality, suicide, etc. (see Hastings and Berry, 1979). The usual problem with cohort analysis is that we must wait for the death of a complete cohort before a complete diagnosis can be made. The major difficulty is the “right censored data problem”: since the future is not known today, the coming trajectory of cohorts is highly hypothetical.

To reduce the uncertainty, we could put forward two types of social hypotheses based on arguments of cohort progress and cohort socialization. The first one is the “long-term generational progress” (LTGP) hypothesis: later cohorts will benefit more than their predecessors from longer education, better income, improved health system, higher life expectancy, and from all the benefits resulting from technical, economic or social progress. Immanuel Kant was the first to underline that generational inequality: former cohorts are relatively deprived and later ones will receive more, and that asymmetric distribution cannot be balanced. This “long-term generational social progress” hypothesis supposes a permanent trend of improvement in economic, social and cultural terms. The “*génération 1914*” is certainly an exception to LTGP, but we will provide more contemporary examples.

The second hypothesis is the “short term amplifying role” of newer generations (STAR). The LTGP conjecture suggests a long-term linear trend of progress, but the empirical dynamics are generally less stable, with cycles and non-linearities, decelerations and accelerations, breaks and ruptures. The newer generation, which has just experienced its

transitional socialization, is generally reacting strongly to new trends, a fact that Mannheim and Mead observed. In periods of sudden social change, the newer cohorts are the most influenced by the discontinuities of history because they are the first to experience the new contexts of socialization that previous cohorts could not anticipate and in which they do not participate (Mead, 1970). More precisely, during an economic acceleration, the young generation of adults generally do better than older ones because they can move easily to better positions; conversely, during an economic slowdown, the newcomers are generally more fragile because they have less room in the social structure, and no past accumulation of human or social capital, nor do they possess social rights to smooth the downward shock they face. We can expect such fluctuations in the distribution of well-being by cohorts, with a succession of “sacrificed” and “elect” generations emerging over time; and if the effect of socialization is strong and durable, each generation retains the consequences of its difficult or favorable entry. These fluctuations in the distribution of well-being before any redistribution could correspond to even stronger inequalities after redistribution, since the generations marked by prosperity tend to accumulate larger contributive social rights than the generations marked by deprivation.

3- The multidimensional “*fracture générationnelle*” in France

In France, the economic slowdown has provoked a dramatic multidimensional “*fracture générationnelle*” since the late 1970s (Chauvel, 2002: “preface”; 2003). This portrait is grim, but it is founded on strong empirical bases, robust analyses of standards and alternative sets of microdata offering convergent results. Three principal topics will be highlighted here: first, the economic marginalization of new entrants into the labor market and its direct effects on social structure; second, the long-term consequences of this deprivation in terms of socialization and life chances; and finally, the consequences for the political participation of these cohorts, and their support for the contemporary welfare regime.

The economic decline of youth

The first aspect of the dynamics of social generation in France is the change in the cohort distribution of economic means. A large redistribution of earnings and incomes occurred between the seventies and today. In 1977, the earning gap between age groups 30-35 and 50-

55 was 15%; the gap is now about 40%. During the “*Trente glorieuses*”, the young wage earners generally began in the labor market with the same level of income as their own parents at the end of a complete career. For the last twenty years, we have observed the stagnation of the wages of the young while wages for older people have grown by 20% or more. Here is a new compromise between age groups, whose consequences are not completely understood by contemporary social sciences. But it is not simply a change on the relative position of age groups: members of the elder generation (now, those at age 55, more or less) were relatively advantaged in their youth when compared to their seniors, and now, too, when these seniors are compared their young successors. The generational gaps result from double gains and double pains.

How could we explain this increasing gap? In fact, this is a consequence of a changing collective compromise, which occurred happened during the mid-1970s and early 1980s. This transition in the social value of generations brought from a relative valorization of newer generations, as a positive future we had to invest in, to a relative valorization of the protection of the adults’ and seniors’ stability, even at the expense of the young. The main factor in the redistribution of well-being concerned unemployment. High unemployment rates were socially acceptable for young workers, provided that adult employees with dependent children could avoid these difficulties. In 1974, the unemployment rate of those who left school 24 months before or less was about 4%; by 1985, those who left school recently had an unemployment rate of 35%, which remained the case through 1996; in 2002, at the end of the recent wave of economic recovery, it was close to 18 %. The unemployment rates of recent school leavers are strongly reactive to the economic situation whereas the middle-aged and senior rates remain more stable: an economic slowdown has serious consequences for younger adults, and recovery first benefits new entrants in the labor market. Evidently, the perverse consequence of that collective compromise for the protection of adults at the expense of newcomers is the lack of socialization of the new sacrificed generations: even if they are now adults, with dependent children of their own, their unemployment rates remain much higher, and their earnings abnormally low when compared to other age groups, because of a kind of “scarring effect”. At the end of the eighties, the unemployment rate of the group at age 40 to 44 was still about 4% and is now over 8%. The age compromise for the protection of adults with dependent children is unclear now. This “scarring effect” is even clearer concerning

earnings: the cohorts of new entrants in the labor market in a time of downturn have to accept lower wages; conversely, for young workers, a strong economy allows them to negotiate better earnings. After this entry point, the earning gaps remains because of the lack of catch up effect on earnings (Chauvel, 2003, chap. 3): some generations are about 10 points above or below the long-term trend, because of the point at which they entered the workforce, and after age 30, the relative benefit or handicap remains stable.³

A complementary factor relates to the dynamics of occupational structure and the stratification system. In France as in the US (Mendras, 1988; Bell, 1973), the standard hypothesis of stratification change suggests that the long-term educational expansion of the twentieth century, and the emergence of a knowledge-based society, have stimulated the enlargement of the middle and upper middle classes; thus, the newer generation could have mechanically benefited from the expansion of the occupational groups of experts, managers or professionals (“*cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures*”, in French⁴), to whom we often add middle management and lower professionals in the private and public sectors (such as school teachers and nurses), who exemplify the “new technical middle class”, whose social hegemony was predicted in the seventies (“*professions intermédiaires*” in the official French nomenclature of occupations).

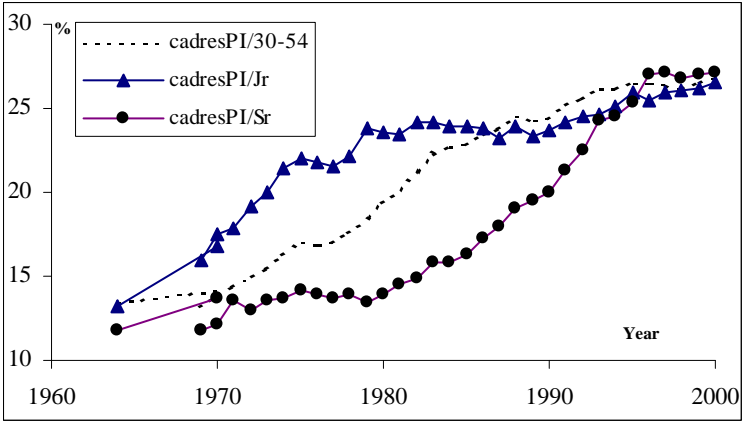
At the aggregated level, the expansion of these middle and higher occupational groups in France seems to be a demonstration of that idea: for the aggregated age group between 30 and 54, the rise is from 14% in 1970 to 26% of the total population (figure 2). However, when

³ If in a wage panel we connect individual earnings at year t and $t+4$, and are about to identify a generational parameter of relative cohort benefit/handicap (relatively to the linear trend of progress) at year t , the wage growth rate $\Delta\{\text{Log}W(t) \mapsto \text{Log}W(t+4)\}$ of individuals is about the same for the members of privileged or deprived generations. It means that the members of relatively deprived generations at year t cannot make up for the relative handicap they began with. In fact, more strikingly, the catch-up effect parameter is significantly negative, even if the corresponding effect is slight: the relative growth of the members of handicapped cohorts is lower, and this relative handicap increases. An interpretation could be that if the labour market is segmented by age, the relative handicap is cumulative, since in any new bargaining with an employer the market value of the members of handicapped cohorts is not assessed in a comparison with any other individual, but with the members of his or her own cohort. Then, the relative position in a wage negotiation of a member of a relatively deprived cohort could be relatively worse.

⁴ The French representation of the social stratification system in terms of occupation is different from the American one; the French tradition is very strong and contributes to a declining but still central “classist” vision of French society, shared by most social scientists, the media and social actors. In this respect, the contrast with the US is dramatic. See also Szreter (1993) who develops a comparative view of the difference in the representations of middle class occupational groups.

we make a distinction between age groups, the dynamics are much more complicated: at age 30, the percentage of those in middle and higher white collar occupational groups jumped from 14% to 23% from 1965 to 1975, and reached 24.5% in 1980. In the earlier period, the trend strongly accelerated for these “juniors”, but stalled after 1980: a 1.5-point increase in the two decades between 1980 and 2000, compared to a 9-point increase in the 1970s.

2- “Cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures” plus “Professions intermédiaires” in two age groups



Source: Enquêtes *Emploi* 1969-2000 et *Formation-qualification-professionnelle* 1964 et 1977, INSEE; archives LASMAS-Quételet

Note: In 2000, 26% of “juniors” (=age group 30 to 34) are in the middle or higher occupational groups; the figure for seniors (=50 to 54) is 27%. The proportions were respectively 24.5% and 14% in 1980. The percentages are calculated using the total age group population.

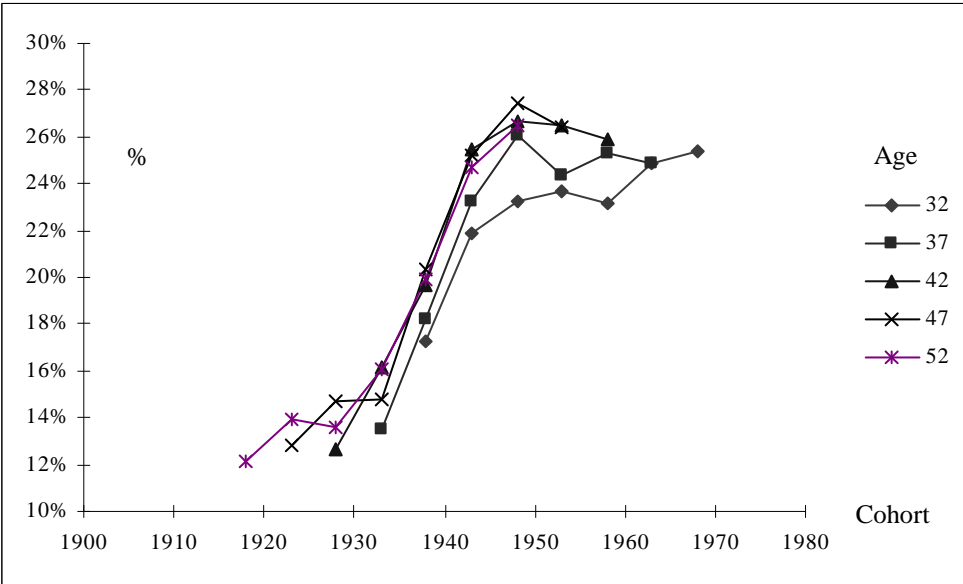
In the middle of the “Trente glorieuses”, France experienced a dramatic expansion of the public sector and high-tech large companies (Airbus, France Télécom, civil nuclear electricity planning, health system, universities and research centers, etc.), creating strong demand for highly qualified employees with higher education. The first cohorts of the baby-boom (the 1945 cohort, which was 30 years old in 1975) were surely not a sacrificed generation since they enjoyed longer education in the context of a dynamic labor market, and did not face the diminishing returns to education that subsequent cohorts have faced. In 2000, 25 years later, the portion of 30-year-old in mid-level and higher white-collar occupational groups is quite similar and stable (26%), compared to 23% in 1975 and 24.5 in 1980. In this respect, the cohort born in 1970 knows no clear progress. However, during the 1990s, the expansion for “seniors” (that is, the “juniors” of the seventies) is obvious. Thus, the expansion of mid-level and higher occupational groups’ across generations is not linear. The apparent

linear growth results from the inappropriate aggregation of a strong expansion — for the early baby-boomers — and of a strong slowdown for the succeeding generations.

Scarring effect and generation dyssocialization

These evolutions would have had no significant social impact if, for the new generations, these early difficulties had no permanent effect. If the new entrants in the labor force in a period of scarcity could catch up from their early difficulties later in their lives, the problem would be anecdotal or residual. The assessment of the long-term impact of these early difficulties is central to the interpretation; if young, deprived generations do not catch up, a kind of long-term *hysteresis* effect appears that we can call a “scar” or “scarring effect”, since the handicap seems definitive. The age-period-cohort analysis shows that cohorts who experienced a difficult (favorable) entry because of a context of recession (expansion), continue to suffer (benefit) from a relative delay (advancement) in upward mobility when they are compared to the average situation. The relative position of a collective cohort at age 30 is rapidly crystallized, and there does not appear to be a substantial catch-up effect later on (figure 3).

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



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

Note: The cohort diagram is a strong instrument for the analysis of cohort effects. It compares the achievement at the same age of different cohorts. If the curves are linear, we have a stable progress by cohort. If we see cohort accelerations and decelerations affecting the same cohorts, we can analyze long-term cohort effects. The 1948 cohort benefits from an acceleration of its position at age 32 (23% compared to 17% for the 1938 cohort, and less than 12% for the 1933 cohort — as we can suppose). The 1958 cohort, which at age 32 stalls relative to the 1948 one, does not catch up by age 42. At age 32, the rate for the cohort 1968 was 2 points higher than that of the 1948 one, whereas the rate for the 1948 cohort was about 13 points higher compared to that of the 1928 cohort. Since the opportunity for growth is neither similar nor linear from one cohort to another, some benefit from better careers than others. Generational history is not linear.

How can we explain the lack of a generational catch-up dynamics? Those who had benefited from a period of entry marked by a strong demand for skilled jobs experienced faster career and earlier labor experience at higher levels of responsibility, with better wages; these individuals (and the cohort they constitute at an aggregated level) retain the long term benefits of the early opportunities they enjoyed, which will positively influence their future trajectory at any later age. For those who entered the labor market under difficult economic conditions, the periods of unemployment they faced, the necessity to accept less qualified jobs with lower wages, and the consecutive delays in career progression, imply negative *stimuli* for their own trajectories (decline in ambition, lack of valued work experiences) and could appear as a negative signal for future potential employers. The hypothesis we present here for France is that cohort-specific socialization contexts imply long-term opportunities and life chances for individuals and for their cohorts; when the difficulties disappear, the cohorts who faced these problems continue to suffer from long-term consequences of past handicaps.

In more concrete terms, the cohorts born during the forties, who benefited from the economic acceleration of the late sixties, were relatively privileged compared to the previous cohorts when young, and are relatively advantaged when compared to the newer ones, because of the lack of progress for the young from 1975 to the present. We can generalize this observation: the cohorts who entered the labor force after 1975 and experienced an economic slump and mass unemployment, have been the early victims of the new generational dynamics, and they retain the long-term scars of their initial difficulties in the labor market.

An important point we cannot develop at length here is the consequences of educational expansion. If the level of education has increased in the cohorts born in 1950 to 1975, that positive trend was accompanied by a strong social devalorization of grades (Chauvel, 2000). More specifically, the first cohorts of the baby boom have benefited from an

expansion of education at a time when the rewards to education remained stable: even if there were twice as many *Baccalauréat* recipients in the 1948 cohort than in the 1935 one, their likelihood of access to higher social or economic positions did not shrink. On the other hand, the generations that followed had to deal with a strong trend of devaluation in terms of the economic and social returns to education. The first consequence is a rush to the most valued and selective grades (in the “*Grandes écoles*” of the elite such as *Ecole Polytechnique*, *Ecole Nationale d’Administration*, *Sciences-Po Paris*, etc.) whose value remains stable, but whose population becomes more and more specific and may be discriminate in terms of social origins. The second consequence is a strong devalorization of less prestigious universities, which are less exclusive but have much smaller per capita endowments in comparison to the *Grandes écoles*. In the same way, the best secondary schools become more selective, with major consequences in terms of urban segregation. In the French case, the school system was traditionally the central institution of the Republic and at the heart of its idea of Progress, providing the strongest support for French-style social democracy and meritocracy. The collapse of the value of grades implies a destabilization of this myth and a pessimistic outlook on progress, developments that we can expect to have political consequences.

Now that we are nearing the end of this long-term slowdown, which began 25 years ago, we can compare two social and genealogical generations⁵. For the first time in a period of peace, the youth of the new generation are not better off than their parents at the same age. In fact, the “1968 generation”, born in 1948, are the children of those born in 1918 who were young adults in World War II, and who worked in difficult conditions at the beginning of the “Trente glorieuses”. The condition of the baby boomers was incomparably better than their parents’. But the following genealogical generation, born around 1978 — that is now between 25 and 30 years old —, faces diminished opportunities of growth, not only because of an economic slump, but also because of their relatively poor outcomes in comparison to those of their own parents, who did very well.⁶ We now observe rising rates of downward social

⁵ During the twentieth century, an average age gap of about 30 years separated parents and their children.

⁶ These parents are about to help their children in different ways with the intensification of “*solidarités familiales*” (transfers and transmissions between generations, both financial, in kind, cultural and material) that Attias-Donfut (2000) describes, but at the collective level, the first and the most efficient *solidarité* would consist of a redistribution of social positions.

mobility connected to the proliferation of middle class children who can not find social positions comparable to their parents’.

These diminishing resources and opportunities imply, for the newer generation, an exceptional risk of dyssocialization. The distinction between dissocialization and dyssocialization is essential (in Latin, the prefix dis- means “lack of”, whereas in Greek, dys- means “bad”, “difficult” or “not appropriate”). Indeed, since Durkheim and Merton, we have known the dangers of a gap between aspirations (which result from early socialization, notably in the family) and achievements. Today’s generational transmission problem comes from a lack of correspondence between the values and ideas that the new generation receives (individual freedom, self achievement, valorization of leisure, etc.) and the realities it will face (centrality of market, heteronomy, scarcity, lack of valuable jobs, boredom, etc.). All the generations of the 20th century experienced that lack of correspondence between aspirations and achievement: the early baby-boom generations were socialized in the context of their parents’ values (scarcity, abnegation, submission to a society where work remain the central issue, lack of leisure) linked to the social history of the hard times of the thirties and after, but they finally experienced the “*Trente glorieuse*” and the period of fast growth that offered them comfort, affluence and opportunities for emancipation and leisure. But in this sense, dyssocialisation is not so problematic. The gap could be more difficult for the current young generations experiencing shrinking opportunities. Apparently, the new generation benefits from longer educational careers and higher academic qualifications than its own parents did, but the intense devaluation in social and economic terms of their improved educational assets could provoke a cruel confrontation with reality (i.e. “lost illusions”). The psychosocial difficulties of the new generation (notably, violent behavior, incivilities of any kind, suicide, etc.) could be immediately linked to the gap between what young people suppose they deserve (comparing their parents’ and their own education and social position) and what they are able to achieve (Chauvel, 1997).

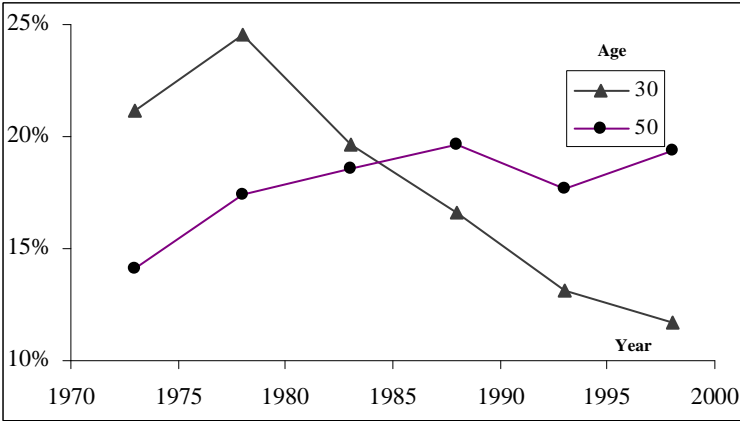
Problems of political representation

The destabilization in the generational distribution of well-being is accompanied by profound changes in access to political power. Profound changes have occurred in the access that various age groups have to political representation and power, not to mention the interest they

have in political issues. Here we can apply Putnam’s (2000) theory of social capital decline, regarding the replacement of the American “civic generation”, born between 1920 and 1940, by the following one. In the French context, the argument is more appropriate if we switch the term “civic” with “mobilized,” and the 1920-1940 birth cohorts with the 1940-1950 ones — in other words, the first “baby-boom generation”. In terms of participation in politics, this point is very clear when we consider the last 30 years.

Even if, for the most part, people lack interest in politics and political matters, the variations in participation in political discussions with friends are strong, particularly when we collapse the results by age groups (figure 4). In the late seventies, 25% of those aged 30 to 34 frequently engaged in political discussions with friends; that proportion had fallen to 12% in the late nineties. The decline is severe when we compare this generation with older age groups, notably those between 50 and 55 years of age, who were significantly more likely to engage in political discussions when surveyed in the late nineties. Evidently, for people at age 30 in 1977 and age 50 in 1997 (i.e. the cohorts born near 1947), political socialization occurred during the late sixties in the context of the events of May 1968 and its consequences.

4- Frequency of political discussions with friends



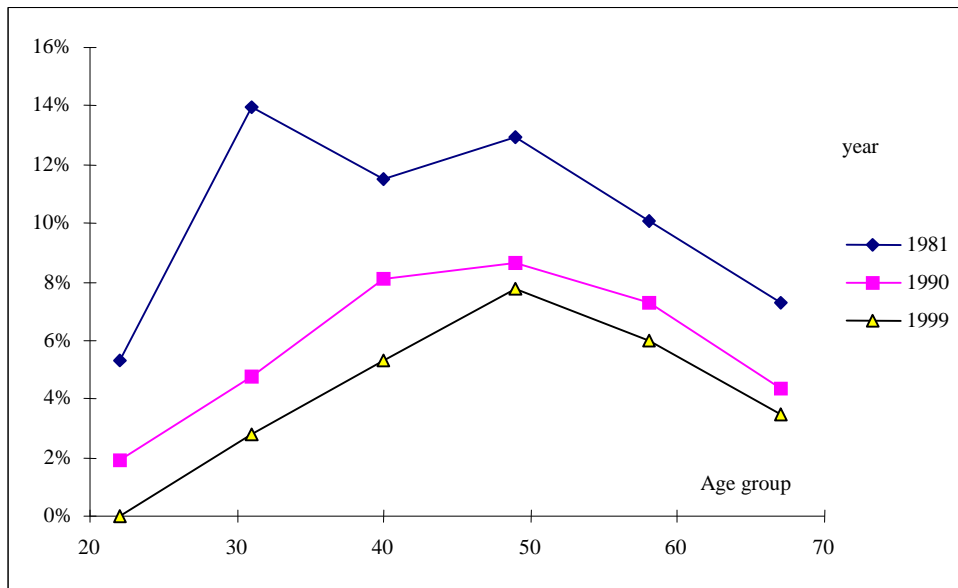
Source: Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File 1970-1999, MZES-ZUMA-ZEUS; Data provided by Grenoble BDSP/CIDSP Data Archive.
 Note: the diagram tracks the percentage answering “frequently” to the question: “When you get together with friends, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never?”. We present periods of 5 year compilations of probabilistic samples of about 3000 individuals per year; the statistical uncertainty on each dot is therefore about +/- 2.0%.

An important characteristic of the “mobilized” generation of 1968 (the first cohorts of the baby boom, born in 1945-1950) is its stronger participation in collective action in its

youth, which continued in the decades that followed. However, by contrast, the specificity of the cohorts born after 1955 and particularly in the late 1960s is their political demobilization: occasional political discussions and declining political participation, notably in traditional political institutions (vote, trade-union membership, parties, and even elective bodies). Since the phenomenon is not so new now — after two decades — and since this generation's lack of participation is so clearly visible in these institutions, French political leaders have become conscious of the long-term problem implied by the difficulty in attracting young members and militants. However, the effort required to change the trend is so massive, that despite the regrets expressed for the situation, nothing is done to change it.

What is the evidence? For trade-union members, the dynamic is very strong, since the socialization effect seems to be significant (figure 5): for a given cohort, the percentage of trade-union members at age 30, or even before, is a good predictor of this percentage at later ages; since it is now about 2% (and not 14% as in the early 1980s), we can expect a strong decline in union membership in the coming years. When we consider the base of trade-unions and parties, the newer generation's participation is declining. What about elected officials? In 1982, the average age of trade unionists and politicians holding an elected position was 45; in 2000, it was 59. At the *Assemblée Nationale* (the French Congress), in 1981, 38.1% of the *Deputés* were 44 years old or less, and 15.1% in the new Congress of 2002. In fact, between 1997 and 2002, the most significant change is the drop in the age group between age 45 and 49, which fell from 18.5% to 12.3%: the political representation of those born after 1953 is clearly declining. If the French electorate is growing older (the age of the average voter jumped from 45.5 to 47.5 years old between 1982 and 2002), its representatives, and those who at the highest levels of decision-making in regards to the future of French society, are aging at a much faster rate.

5- Members of Trade unions by age group from 1981 to 1999 in France



Source: European values survey cumulative file (1981-1999).

Note: the point “age 22” refer to the age group 18 to 27; people at age 22 in 1981 are 31 in 1990 and 40 in 1999; the trade-union members remain at 5% of that cohort. The dynamic here is a kind of generational extinction of trade-unions.

The interpretation of that dynamic may be more subtle than a simple trend of aging: the political generation that had been socialized with the events of 1968, could enter very early into the highest spheres of political institutions at the end of the 1970s and 1980s; now, many of the members of this generation are still active in politics and, since there is no apparent problem, no need for dynamics for a new political generation appears to have emerged. The homogeneity in terms of the age of the French “*classe politique*” is now substantial, and the question of the transmission of political know-how and ideological and organizational legacy remains quite problematic for the coming decades. A consequence of this trend is the growing age gap between the real French society and its political representatives. Here, in terms of generations, political power is more accessible to those who are already dominant in terms of social and economic power, and the younger generations, who lack comparable material resources, also suffer from a loss of democratic influence, and even interest, since they are not engaged in political discussions. The lack of clear collective consciousness is a remarkable trait of the democratic debate at the present time. In fact, most young employees in many economic sectors are clearly conscious, at the individual level, of

the asymmetric generational play in which they are acting. The political behavior of the young, characterized by distance from institutions and by stronger instability, is somehow rational: why would they support a system where their present and future position is quite unclear?

In terms of political prospects, we should assess the consequences, notably for the sustainability of democracy, of the decline of political socialization. The first problem is the generational transmission of democracy, which supposes a strong civil society whose absence makes the socialization of newer cohorts problematic. Participation in democracy assumes shared social knowledge, political know-how and the ability to insert oneself into the collective networks of political bargaining. Since many institutions are led today by a homogeneous group of baby boomers who will retire at the end of the decade, and since almost nothing is done to socialize a new generation of successors, the sustainability of the political system is quite uncertain and the risk of generational micro-struggles is very high.

The second problem is a question of long-term decision making. Many weighty decisions at the national level (retirement, health, debt issues, etc.) are made by a political class whose remaining life span is generally shorter than that of the average population; the new generations that will have to face (and pay for) the long-term consequences of today's choices do not participate in the decisions made about their own future, because they are supposed to be too young (even if they are 40 or older). That generational asymmetry or bias implies that many reforms are designed to have little immediate negative impact on elders, but to delay payment of the costs of reform to the point that it threatens the future well-being of newer generations. Therefore, the social contract between generations seems to be both unclear and extremely unstable.

Problems of welfare regime sustainability

It may seem that social and structural reforms affect the entire population whatever the age or generation; but in fact, social welfare, welfare state dynamics and welfare regime⁷ change

⁷ By welfare regime, I mean the complex system of decision, production, and distribution of social resources, where the hierarchy and the other dimensions of social differentiation are major issues; this regime includes work regulations, solidarities of family and "Third sector". The shape of the class system is a consequence of the welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

with the succession of cohorts. We have to analyze this point and its consequences for social reforms and *in fine* the sustainability of our contemporary welfare regime. This crucial factor could show that the expensive but efficient public health and pension schemes of the present day could collapse with the future cohort replacement of older “welfare generations” (born between 1925 and 1950) with the generations that follow.

When France’s public pay-as-you-go retirement system was created in 1946, the principle was that wage earners had to participate (and work) for at least 30 years before gaining access to a full pension. Thus, in 1946, those who were 35 or older — that is, born before 1910 — were generally excluded from the new system. Indeed, in large industries, in the public sector and in protected segments of the economy, arrangements had been developed to fulfill the contract, but most workers in smaller firms, those who had experience in agriculture or as self-employed business people, even though they were alive during the creation of this large system of welfare, were already too old to benefit from most of its outcomes: they were destined to fill the ranks of the impoverished elderly⁸ during a golden age for youth. Conversely, today, the new generation leaves school at age 21, loses three years in episodes of unemployment, freelance or non-standard, non-protected activities and begins its participation in the retirement system at an average age of 24. If we add 40 years of contributions (the current requirement which most French seniors can meet because they could start working much earlier than the youth of today) or 46.5 years (the time requirement proposed by the French employers union), we discover that our present system of early retirement (at an average age of 58, with an average level of income close to the employed population) is simply inaccessible for the newcomers: in the most probable scenario, the generations to come of pensioners will not benefit from the generosity of the current system, even if they contribute heavily to the high level of protection that benefits today’s seniors. This point is even clearer when we analyze how the lower half or third (in educational terms) of the young generation, which has to wait for years before obtaining a stable position, is socialized within the working world, and the political and welfare system: we now socialize

the young within a much more unequal system than in the early seventies, and the greater inequalities within today's younger generation could (will) have consequences for their future trajectory.

Some optimistic observers of these trends argue that with a long-term annual rate of growth of about 2%, the retirement system will eventually balance itself out. Moreover, when the baby-boom generation begins to retire, in 2007, new jobs will be available for the younger generation. However, the risk is double here: on the one hand, perhaps we overestimate the number of new positions created, since productivity gains might be obtained at the expense of new entrants; on the other hand, even if new positions are available, members of even newer generations could seize these new opportunities, and an intermediate sacrificed generation, yesterday too young and tomorrow too old, could be the double victim of social change. King Lear could suggest another troubling prospect: long wars of succession among competing generations.

If the existence of such dynamics can be established for the pension system, the same kind of argument can be developed for many other aspects of the French welfare system (the health care system, social expenditures for families, education, etc.). In fact, our French equalitarian system of large homogeneous middle classes of wage earners, which reached its apogee with the generations born during the 1930s and 1940s, seems to be disappearing progressively in a cohort dynamic of dismantlement and disentanglement that the newer generations are experiencing.

5- The American way of cohort inequality and prosperity

These trends may merely demonstrate that France is an exotic country where the civil society, the political culture and the socioeconomic organization are quite problematic. In a more flexible country, where seniority is less systematically valued, different cohorts are competing in an open market, and the conditions of political bargaining can provoke a faster circulation

⁸ In 1959, when a minimum income for old people was created (one third of the minimum wage of that age), it covered more than 50% of those 65 years and older; nowadays, this minimum income is about two-thirds of the present minimum wage, but covers 8% of the same age group, since the currently generous public pay-as-you-go scheme covers almost anyone. Before, the old age groups were poor and unequal, but now they are comparable to the active population in terms of average income and of standard deviation.

of political generations and elites, we may be able to avoid these difficulties. At the first glance, the United States seems to be such a society, where mobility reduces the generational rents that we observe in France. The American dynamic partially fits that hypothesis, but is however much more complex, since we also observe strong generational inequalities in the United States .⁹

A theoretical explanation of American-French divergence

We could attempt here to systematize the link between the welfare state and cohort dynamics,¹⁰ but we have too little space here. For an American-French comparison, it will suffice to underline the pertinent contrasts in the basic societal structures, and their possible impact on cohort dynamics. Compared with France, American society is marked by a liberal-residual welfare system, characterized by the weakness of social redistributions, the submission of social policies to the efficiency of flexible markets, and the idea that the welfare system can operate only in cases of typical market failure. More generally, whereas French society is organized according to stable statuses that supposedly ensure collective security, the American one is marked by an ideal of mobility, individual progress and the idealization of *cursus* (etymologically opposed to *status*): by achievement and not by ascription.

A central example is the valorization of inter firm mobility: at age 40, male wage earners in France have been at the same firm for the last 11 years (on average), when in the United States they have been at the same company for the last 7.5 years (Neumark, 2000; Chauvel, 2003). In France, seniority offers many more protections, social rights and implicit rents, whereas mobility implies more uncertainties than opportunities; this is a residue of the patriarchal regulation of the French labor system where the fidelity of the employee is strongly valued, as are interpersonal contacts and clientele. In contrast, the American labor market values the accumulation of diverse experiences; the bond between firms and their employees is weaker and the rewards of moving (higher wages, principally) surpasses the rewards of staying in place (Barbier and Gautié, 1998). In the French system, if the security of a stable

⁹ Most of the results presented here are systematized in my *Mémoire d'Habilitation* (Chauvel, 2003), that can be downloaded at <http://louis.chauvel.free.fr/HDR151003defacrobat.pdf>.

¹⁰ That attempt, which is presented in Chauvel (2003), connects Esping-Andersen (1990) types of welfare state and cohort dynamics of the welfare regimes.

labor force is greatly valued by most social actors, this objective is secondary in the United States. In the case of an economic slowdown, French firms stop hiring; in the case of greater difficulties, they negotiate early retirement schemes for seniors — at the expense of public funds; if problems deepen, the last in are the first out; the dismissal of middle-aged employees is the last and most expensive course of action when companies are faced with disaster, since heavy compensations must be paid. This system advantages employees with some seniority at the expense of occasional or more casual employees, notably when high unemployment rates deepen the polarization between insiders and outsiders.

The question here is to understand the consequence of this French regime on the trajectories of different birth cohorts. Theoretically, in the case of an economic recession, the generalization of the logics of the French corporatist-conservative compromise implies an insider-outsider polarization of generations, where the new generation has to remain outside for a long time — since they do not work, they do not contribute to social welfare system and do not participate in collective political decisions. The promise of stability for the older cohorts comes at the expense of the socialization of newer ones — who will not catch up later to the position of the older ones. Conversely, since the liberal system is less protective of the status of insiders, an economic recession will prompt negotiations on earnings and on explicit and implicit rights, with cuts affecting all workers, whatever their age. Is this theory in conformity with reality?¹¹

Common patterns: a large proportion of American youth face difficulties, too

The empirical analysis is much more ambiguous, since the American case shows some aspects of similar cohort depression we observe in France. An analysis of United States cohort dynamics reveals the marginalization of large segments of the young. In fact, when we apply the same methodology to the United-States, evidence of strong cohort fluctuations appears in the American case, too, even if the fluctuations are smoother and somewhat blurred.

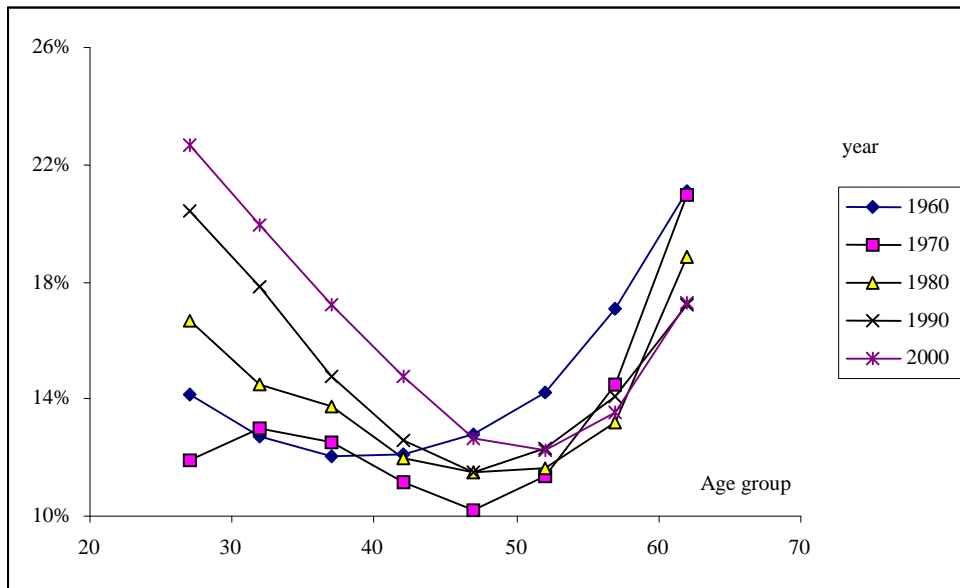
¹¹ The analysis of the response of the social-democrat welfare state in terms of cohorts could be interesting, but we do not address that issue here.

One example is the cohort evolution of American relative poverty rates,¹² which reveal that the same types of difficulties clearly confront new generations in both countries (figure 6). At the national level, for the adult population between age 25 and 65, a dramatic change in the distribution of relative poverty rates by age groups has occurred since the sixties: in 1960, the older the population, the higher the poverty rates; in 2000, on the contrary, the youngest experience the highest poverty rates. Even if poverty rates are very different by region (lower in the Northeast, higher in the South and West), by gender (women are at higher risk), by ethnic group (the poverty rate is lower for Whites and Asians, higher for Blacks and Hispanics), and evidently by level of education, the same right-slipping U-shape structure of poverty rates is observed; whereas yesterday the poorest were the oldest, now it is the youngest who are poorest. A more fine-grained cohort analysis of poverty rates shows that the cohorts born before 1920 have known higher poverty rates (above 15 %); those born between 1920 and 1955 have experienced poverty rates close to 12% or lower (the same relative poverty rates as in Continental European countries); and cohorts born after 1955 now face poverty rates that exceed 20% at their entry into the labor market. It appears that high poverty rates jumped a whole generation. Large proportions of the newer generations face difficulties that their own parents could avoid. The most important point is that newer cohorts are socialized in a context of high poverty rates, and that fact stays with them: even years after the period of socialization, poverty remains higher within cohorts that experienced higher rates at the time of their entry into the labor market.¹³ An auto alimented generational trend prepares a future of mass poverty.

¹² We consider here the relative poverty rates as they are calculated in Europe, where poverty is in reference to the half-median of national standardized equivalent income adjusted for family size (using the OECD equivalence scale which is the square root of household size). The Census Bureau has compiled for decades statistics on poverty in which poverty is defined in absolute terms (the same poverty threshold indexed on price is followed from one survey to the next). In Europe, we consider that if outcomes for the poor do not follow the same trend of affluence that benefits the global population, their situation is even worse; in contrast, in the American tradition of absolute poverty rates, even if the growth of the median income is much higher than the growth of incomes among the poor, if the income of the poor still grow even modestly, poverty is identified as declining. Relative poverty is implicitly determined in relation to the common population, which defines the standard of living of a given time period.

¹³ This point could be analysed in terms of a scarring effect: the earnings increase *significantly less* for the members of relatively deprived cohorts (Chauvel, 2003: 191-194).

6- Poverty rates by adult age groups (Census years 1960-2000) in the US



Source: US Census microdata accessed at www.ipums.org

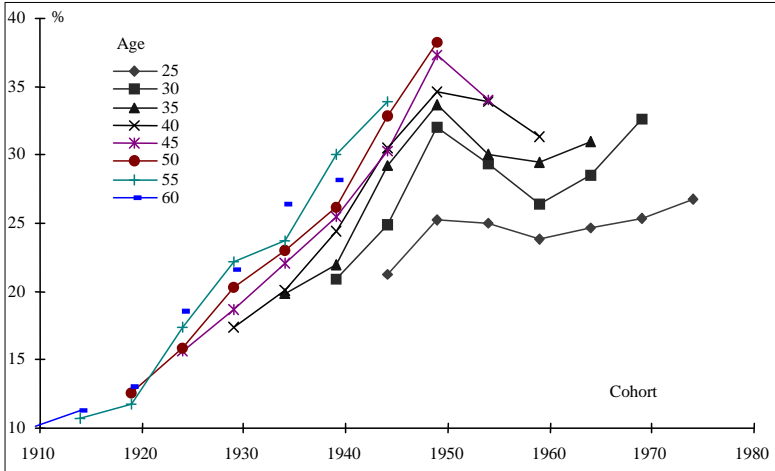
Note: the definition of poverty threshold used here is based on the European relative definition: people with standardized equivalent income adjusted for family size below 50% of the national median are poor. Since 1980, each new generation has entered the labor market with a higher poverty rate, which remains higher as the cohort ages.

Even if we exclude non-natives and members of ethnic or gender minorities (or other combinatory variants of subpopulations) and focus the analysis on the white male population born in the United States, the same pattern emerges, which is not due to higher immigration rates or to higher fertility rates within certain subgroups of the population, but is clearly a general trend occurring within American society. Even during the last observed decade, 1990-2000, which was characterized by an economic boom, the same intensification of the relative poverty rates of newer cohorts is evident.

Education provides another key example of these kinds of cohort dynamics. The age-period-cohort analysis of educational expansion makes clear the existence of substantial gaps between cohorts. Education is not simply a question of skill accumulation or human development; it is also a central institution of public investment in youth and of socialization. The link between education and the structure of the welfare system is therefore of critical concern in the analysis of social protection institution and functioning (Estevez-Abe *et al.*, 2001). Educational expansion could play a major role in improving the economic prospects of

the new cohort (if the social value of education in terms of access to the most valuable social and economic positions remains stable). As it turns out, when we consider the proportion of bachelor's degree holders¹⁴ (figure 8), the trend of educational expansion stops or even reverses after the first cohorts of the baby boom (i.e. those born between 1945 and 1950). These curves show a long linear trend of rising levels of education that begins with the cohorts born in 1920 and that continues with cohorts born in 1945-1950. The following cohorts, however, follow a shakier trajectory, beginning with a drop in the access to bachelor's degrees and followed by a more a recent catch up: we see a decline of about one quarter in the probability of access from the 1950 cohort to the cohort. Finally, the cohort that is born 1970 catches up the level of those born twenty years before.

7- With bachelor's degree or more education in the US male population (cohort diagram)



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

This brings us to an important point for which the explanation is complex. Different complementary factors could explain the expansion of cohorts born from 1920 to 1950:

¹⁴ The results are even stronger for master's degree holders, who experienced a decline of about 30% between cohorts born in 1950 and 1965.

mainly the 1944 G.I. Bill of Rights,¹⁵ and later the context of the Vietnam War — which encouraged students to remain in college (Card and Lemieux, 2000). However, this is a problem with the GI Bill *versus* war explanation: why did women of the 1945-1950 cohort enjoy longer educational careers too? From 1945 to 1970 or 1975, other economic or historical traits could complement that explanation of the linear growth in the level of education from the cohort born in 1920 to the 1950 cohort: the acceleration of public investment in education, subsidies and loan supports, federal and local contracts for research, the rising inflation rates — which particularly favor loans for students —, and so on. All these factors offer partial explanations.

The cohorts that followed the cohort born in 1950, experienced a reverse trend, resulting from the fiscal crisis of the seventies, and from many other factors that depressed educational attainment (Weir, 2002). In fact, for these cohorts, the new context of educational investment made going to school much less attractive, because of financial and political pressures. The emergence of a phenomenon of over-education — of declining returns to education (Freeman, 1976) — prompted a downward shift in public support for education and could explain the general atmosphere (*Zeitgeist*) that characterized a period of at least fifteen years during which higher education was seen as less attractive. Granted skyrocketing university tuitions and fees could also explain the declining proportion of graduates by cohort (Heller, 2002). In any case, the long-term consequence of the decline in the proportion of bachelor's and master's degrees for the cohorts born between 1950 and 1965, was a reduction in the supply of graduates and, ultimately, a resurgence in returns to education for the newer cohorts but also for the elder ones too, even if the later cohorts had benefited previously from inexpensive access to education.

Education is an investment in newer generations. For the cohorts born between 1920 and 1950, who went to school at a time of strong growth in this investment, the generational progress was clear: almost no one could be less educated than his or her own parents. The decline between the 1950 cohort and the 1965 cohort in this investment, is one of the reasons

¹⁵ To foster the integration of young veterans back into society, free access to education was made available in 1944 to those who served; the grants and loans offered became a major source of income for universities (Bennett, 2000). The economic acceleration absorbed this new graduated population and this successful experiment was later extended to Korean and Vietnam veterans.

for “Generation X’s” current difficulties. Even today, in spite of the recovery of educational attainment in the 1970 cohort, parents and children now have almost the same distribution of education: to be less educated than one’s parents is now quite common.

Today, seniors have never been in better educational positions, relative to the young. This differential has clear consequences on the occupational, wage and income distribution between cohorts: because seniors have become more educated and education has continued to have a stable social and economic value, their social positions have remained higher and their earnings better, both relatively and absolutely. Conversely, poverty rates have grown faster in the young generations. Middle- and higher- skilled occupational groups have seen slower expansion for the young than for older cohorts. Therefore, we would have to conclude that no clear difference exists between the American and French trends. There seem to be no path dependency in the cohort dynamics, because otherwise the American “free market” system and the rigid and statutory French system of “*droits acquis*” (acquired social rights) would not have produced the same kind of generational fracture. In fact, the main difference lies somewhere else.

The American specificity: among youth, an elite benefit from exceptional growth

Despite these pessimistic trends, we can demonstrate that a small fraction of the new generation is better off at its entry into the labor market than any former one. We have difficulties to assess the size of that “privileged” population, since income polarization benefits the highest strata much more. Younger age groups provide the most vivid example of this American trend: between 1990 and 2000, for people aged 30 to 34, the median standardized income adjusted for family size grew by 1.7% in real terms; for the 7th decile, it increased by 4.4%; for the 9th decile, by 9.2%; for the 99th centile, by 23.9%. The higher the level of income, the stronger the growth. So, we could argue that 60% of the population enjoyed positive growth, and 8% two-digit growth. In fact, only a small minority enjoyed a very substantial increase in their income. In the United States, a young, rich and educated elite benefited from the growth of the 1990s and began its career at higher levels than previous cohorts, and it appears that this group will continue to climb the income scale in the years

ahead. Those who were successful in college and obtain a bachelor's or a master's degree from a well-recognized university benefit now from the scarcity of their degree.

As a result, although the dynamics of the bottom and the top of the social pyramid are somewhat similar in France (relative to the American case), in the United States, the rich, the poor and the median classes face divergent trajectories, especially when they are analyzed in terms of cohorts. At the bottom, the downturn experienced by newer generations (from the 1950 cohort to the most recent), who permanently face higher poverty rates at the time of their entry into the labor market and later, clearly reveals declining opportunities. The median categories experience a kind of stagnation or slow growth if their opportunities (an annual trend of about +0.5% in their real earnings during the two last decades, far lower than the +3.0% per year of the fifties-sixties) with no major change. On the other hand, the young elites continue to benefit from the “long-term generational progress” (LTGP) hypothesis. Among the young elites — notably those with a bachelor's degree or more education, and more generally for the top decile group — the life chances of the generations born after 1955 have not been reduced. In, their case, progress from generation to generation seems to be unequivocal. This segment of the American society offers a very optimistic view on the continuation and transmission of the American Dream, but its trajectory has diverged from that of other social groups for the last two decades. Therefore, the career trajectories of recent college graduates', which are quite optimistic, provide a biased point of view on American trends, since most Americans are not benefiting from such improving life chances.¹⁶

Synthesis: the growth of inequality by cohort in the United States

Since the early 1980s, American society has known an unequivocal polarization between two opposite social groups who face a dynamic of divergence in the newer generation. The bottom of the American social structure is subject to an economic decline and to social difficulties that are somewhat similar or even worse when compared to the French situation; at the opposite end, individuals at the top of the educational and income scale continue to improve

their socioeconomic position and seem to enjoy an endless trend of prosperity. The dynamics for the median and the average classes are not so clear and greatly depend on the economic cycle.

Thus, impressive cohort inequalities characterize American society, too, inequalities that are mechanically increasing for newer cohorts. The American cohort dynamics are not exactly similar to those in France, since they are more complex and sometimes equivocal. The French context of statutory protection of elder cohorts implies a general downturn of the status of younger generations, from the top to the bottom of the social scale; the American one, marked by stronger competition and inequalities in life chances, is characterized by greater inequalities, notably for the most recent generations who are socialized in a social structure where the gap between the top and the bottom is continuously enlarging. If Thernstrom (1973) depicted an American society where the ancient generation of young adults in 1929 (then born by 1909) never caught up the difficulties of their youth — regardless of social class — even during the period of prosperity that emerged after 1945, the economic slowdown of 1970-1992 has had a much more complex effect since the young social elite has never been subjected to clear decline. In a context of economic recession or stagnation, to the point of view of the social groups at the top of the socioeconomic pyramid, the growth of inequality provides a way for increasing their income, even if the consequence is deepening difficulties for other groups.

6- France and the US: two divergent welfare systems?

The central point of my conclusion pertains to the long-term sustainability of welfare regimes. To be stable in the long term, a social system must arrange its own reproduction from one generation to the next. In France, the today's seniors benefit from a large welfare state, but the vast social rights they were able to accumulate was the consequence of their relatively advantaged careers; we assert that the new generations, when they become seniors themselves, will not be able to benefit from the same rights, and the large size of the present welfare state

¹⁶ I have not analyzed here the changes in political participation and representation that I have indicated occurred in France. However, we may find a strong cohort decline in trade unions, political participation, and comparable changes in the age distribution of the U.S. Congress. Chauvel (2003: 152-158) develops these points.

will mechanically erode with cohort replacement, since the reproduction of the welfare regime is not ascertained.

In France, where the generational dynamics of the different social strata are parallel if not similar, the major problem is not generational inequalities, but the fact that newer generations heavily support a welfare system that could collapse before they benefit from it. The problem is not stagnation, but lack of preparation in the long-term, at the expense of the most fragile population: the young and the recently socialized generations. Here lies the problem of sustainability for the current welfare regime: it appears large, strong and durable, but its decline is almost certain; the security it offers to seniors is often at the expense of young cohorts facing radical uncertainty.

In the United States, the case is more complicated. For the young generations, the highest classes enjoy exceptionally better positions while the median classes see their fortunes stagnate and the poor are subjected to relative, if not absolute, deprivation. The problem there is that newer generations prefigure a future of ever stronger inequalities: at the bottom, low wages go with a lack of social protection and, at the top, economic affluence is cumulative with unprecedented access to social and educational resources. The shortcomings of such a social structure are not so visible when the working poor are young, but when they grow older and need resources first for their children's health and education, and later for their own autonomy, health, access to facilities, service and assistance in their elder years, problems will clearly emerge. For the last two decades, we have socialized a fragile generation (in France) and an extremely unequal one (in the United States). They were based on specific social structures and stratification systems which are fading away now, and as a result these two welfare regimes severe destabilization in the coming years.

The key questions are: will younger generation in France continue to sustain a system where their social condition is ever devaluated compared to the older generations, with no clear prospects of improvement? Will the American poor (and also middle or "median" class) accept an even lower quality of life compared to the top? For the moment, these intergenerational inequalities are accepted, since they are generally unknown, their social visibility is low and their political recognition null. A kind of silent consensus maintains the system in spite of the strong contrast between realities and representations. In France, this situation induces a complex trend of pessimism and produces political instability

characterized by stronger and shakier political U-turns. In the United States, the apparent stability comes from lower rates of participation in elections, but uncertainty is there a central concern too. In both cases, for the analysis of social structure and of welfare regime dynamics, future can not be seen as a linear continuation of past, since newer generations are not socialized in the continuity of previous ones. But here is my main conclusion: because today's reform do not consider seriously the cohort dynamics, their understanding of the life chances of the generations now in play are myopic. The reforms are often very late and designed to balance previous disequilibria: thus they miss their target, give more resources to privileged generations and spoil the sacrificed ones, and ultimately deteriorate the sustainability of the welfare regime. Uncertainty and instability will grow apace, and given that violence is often the consequence of the tensions that inequality promotes, conflicts between generations could easily emerge in the twenty-first century.

References:

- Attias-Donfut C., 2000, « Rapports de générations: transferts intrafamiliaux et dynamique macrosociale », *Revue française de sociologie*, vol.41, n°4, pp.643-684
- 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.
- Barbier J.C. and J. Gautié (dir.), 1998, *Les politiques de l'emploi en Europe et aux Etats Unis, Cahiers du CEE*, Paris, PUF.
- 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.
- Bell D., 1973, *Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*, NY, Basic Books.
- Bennett M.J., 2000, *When dreams came true: the GI bill and the making of modern America*, Washington, D.C., Brassey's.

- 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., 1997, “L’uniformisation du taux de suicide masculin selon l’âge: effet de génération ou recomposition du cycle de vie ?”, *Revue française de sociologie*, XXXVIII-4, pp. 681-734.
- Chauvel L., 1998 [2^e ed 2002], *Le destin des générations: structure sociale et cohortes en France au XX^e siècle*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.
- Chauvel L., 2000, « Valorisation et dévalorisation sociale des titres: une comparaison France – Etats-Unis », pp. 341-352, in A. van Zanten (dir.), *L’état de l’école*, La Découverte, Paris.
- Chauvel L., 2003, *Génération sociale et socialisation transitionnelle: Fluctuations cohortales et stratification sociale en France et aux Etats-Unis au XX^e siècle*, Mémoire d’Habilitation à Diriger des recherches, Sciences-Po Paris.
- Easterlin R.A., 1966, “Economic-Demographic Interactions and Long Swings in Economic Growth”, *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 56, No. 5. (Dec., 1966), pp. 1063-1104.
- Esping-Andersen G., 1990, *The Tree Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Esping-Andersen G., with D. Gallie, A. Hemerijck and J. Myles, 2002, *Why we need a new welfare state*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Estevez-Abe M., T. Iversen and D. Soskice, 2001, “Social Protection and the Formation of Skills: A Reinterpretation of the Welfare State”, in P. Hall and D. Soskice (eds), *Varieties of capitalism: the institutional foundations of comparative advantage / ed. by Peter A. Hall and David Soskice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 145-183.
- Fourastié J., 1979, *Les Trente Glorieuses ou la révolution invisible*, Paris, Fayard.
- Freeman R.B., 1976, *The overeducated american*, New York, Academic Press.
- Hastings D.W. and L.G. Berry, 1979, *Cohort Analysis: a Collection of Interdisciplinary Readings*, Oxford (Ohio), Scripps Foundation for Research in Population Problems.

- Heller D.E. (dir.), 2002, *Conditions of access: higher education for lower income students*, Westport (CT), Praeger publishers.
- Krugman P.R., 1992, *The age of diminished expectations: US economic policy in the 1990s*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press.
- Maddison A., 1982, *Phases of capitalist development*, Oxford, Oxford university press.
- Mannheim K., 1990(1928), *Le problème des générations*, Nathan, Paris.
- Mason K.O., W.M. Mason, H.H. Winsborough et W.H. Poole, 1973, "Some Methodological Issues in Cohort Analysis of Archival Data", *American Sociological Review*, 38, pp. 242-258.
- Mead M., 1970, *Culture and commitment; a study of the generation gap*, Garden City (N.Y.), American Museum of Natural History - Natural History Press.
- Mendras H., 1988, *La seconde révolution française: 1965-1984*, Paris, Gallimard.
- Mentré F., 1920, *Les générations sociales*, Paris, Éd. Bossard.
- Neumark D., 2000, *On the job: is long term employment a thing of the past?*, News York, Russell Sage Foundation.
- Putnam, R. D. 2000, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York, Simon and Schuster.
- Ryder N.B., 1965, "The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change", *American Sociological Review*, 30, pp. 843-861.
- Szreter S.R.S., 1993, "The Official Representation of Social Classes in Britain, the United States, and France: The Professional Model and "Les Cadres"", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35, 2, 285-317.
- Thernstrom S., 1973, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.).
- Weir M., 2002, "The American Middle Class and the Politics of Education", in O. Zunz, *Social Contracts Under Stress: The Middle Classes of America, Europe, and Japan at the Turn of the Century*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation.