

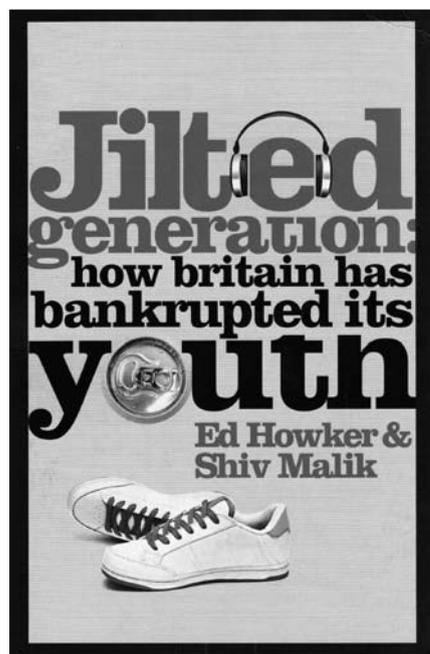
# Ed Howker and Shiv Malik: The Jilted Generation

Reviewed by James Wilhelm

To judge from comments made in the British press, it would seem reasonable to conclude that Ed Howker and Shiv Malik are appalled but not entirely surprised by the UK riots which took place during August 2011. The authors have not gone as far as endorsing the eruptions of chaos, but *Jilted Generation*, published prior to the tumult, did forewarn through a thoroughgoing economic, political and social investigation that a socio-politically dangerous relationship between today's old and young was developing. The ambiguity of the riots has left public commentators in search of an explanatory framework, but recent events have been peculiarly resistant to orthodox explanations of left and right, thus creating an explanatory vacuum. *Jilted Generation* meets that demand from a decisively intergenerational perspective.

The book's argument is as follows: members of the "jilted generation", roughly defined as those born between 1979 and 1994, are facing a socio-economic crisis. Their opportunities have dwindled and burdens increased in comparison with the relatively privileged "baby boomer" generation (roughly born between 1945 and 1965). The book does not designate the causality of these profound problems which afflict the jilted generation to the inherent logic of capitalism, or solely to trends in demographics. Rather, it is an attempt to construct a non-reductionist polemic on being young in short-termist Britain – a Britain which has forgotten about its youth (the future), and focuses almost exclusively on the satisfaction of the baby boomers (the present). With regard to the structure, an in-depth analysis of four intergenerational facets is conducted: housing, jobs, inheritance and politics.

As a book which juxtaposes the jilted and baby-boomer generations, the act of persuading the reader that the "jilted generation" concept (and the use of "generation" in general) is meaningful in a contemporary UK context is its most fundamental task. According to the authors, members of the



jilted generation, determined by year of birth, are united in facing a set of unfavourable political and economic circumstances, leading to a common outlook. This would make the jilted generation a chronological generation, in so far as this generation is defined as having a fixed start and end point (people born between 1979 and 1994), and to a lesser extent a societal generation, because this generation share similar (although, far from homogenous) attitudes, lifestyles and perspectives. Given the singular importance of the "generation" concept, a more rigorous discussion and justification for this choice would have been welcome in the opening chapter. Although a few supportive graphs with accompanying commentaries are utilised, a reasoned discussion of why the specific definition of the "generation" concept was adopted does not feature. However, the book is not an explicitly scientific undertaking and therefore, for stylistic reasons, the authors may have decided to avoid a wordy definitional exercise. Moreover, explanatory power is often a more meaningful criterion by which a concept's usefulness can be measured.

In this respect, the book's interpretation of the unjustness of housing opportunities

for young people, well substantiated throughout, is clear and convincing: tax breaks and subsidies for first-time buyers have been progressively reduced since the Thatcher era (only after the baby-boomer generation were able to get a foot on the property ladder as a result of these benefits); public housing has been sold off largely to the benefit of baby boomers without a compensatory increase in its supply, leading to the cost of housing reaching an unaffordable level for today's first-time buyers; and, in recent years, building regulations have been relaxed, meaning that not only are new houses relatively expensive due to supply-side failures, but of lesser quality too.

Counter-intuitively perhaps, one of the book's most fascinating lines of enquiry is a scathing critique of the minimum wage as a key instrument of the institutionalisation of age prejudice: a piece of legislation which, for most readers, might be considered a triumph for at least intragenerational justice. It is noted that the minimum wage discriminates against young people: in 1999, for those under 22, the minimum wage was £4.77, and for those aged 16-17, it was just £3.53. Today, the rate for those aged 16-17 is still only £3.68, while adults can expect £6.08. They highlight that this policy has led to the adoption age-related pay schemes by the private sector which mirror the discrimination of the state sector.

A more questionable claim of Howker and Malik is that the young are experiencing the highest unemployment rates in modern British history. Although eloquently reasoned, the authors must be taken to task for not discussing the finer details employment statistics. The problem is as follows: it is well known that the amount of young people who have entered higher education in the last twenty years has increased dramatically, but no qualifying statement of how this intake might distort youth employment statistics is included. Writing for the BBC, Michael Blastland contends that the opening of higher education institutions to a greater number of students in recent years has dramatically distorted comparisons of

youth unemployment today and its historical rate for the following reason: the rate of youth unemployment is a reflection of “youths excluding those in education” – apart from those in full-time education seeking part-time work – and *not a share of all youths*. Thus, if there is an increase in the number of youths in the education system, the remaining number of unemployed youth may remain the same, but because the official rate of youth unemployment excludes those now in education, the unemployed youths as a fraction of the remaining figure will be higher. Given that unemployed young people constitute a social strata which is unlikely to enter higher education, this effect is highly probable when the exponential increase in young people going to university in recent decades is taken into account. Thus the rate of youth unemployment can increase simply because more young people are attending university. Since Malik and Howker’s claim that Britain’s youth are experiencing the highest unemployment levels in history is rooted in percentage comparisons between youth unemployment today and its historical levels, it follows that they may be right when one takes the rate at face-value, but a deeper analysis suggests that this conclusion could be misleading.

One of Howker and Malik’s key arguments is that the problems which afflict the jilted generation are the result of a dysfunctional consideration of the past and future. The claim rests on two lines of reasoning, one in relation to the UK demographic structure, the other cultural. The structural reason for this dysfunction is that Britain is an ageing society in which the baby-boomer generation has a higher propensity to vote than young people. Thus, since baby boomers are more likely to enter the ballot-box, a rational politician must tailor policies to gain the support of this politically key cross-section of the electorate (valorisation of the present). Their second line of reasoning, grounded in research conducted from the 1960s onwards in the field of both marketing and politics, is that a fundamental transformation has taken place in British society. The bottom line is that the British have become “inner-directed”; satisfaction of present wants and the realisation of the inner-self have taken precedence over family commitments and delayed gratification. Politicians from Thatcher to Blair have done the same as the market researchers: marketed products (policies) to the consumer (electorate). Predictably, the result has

been a politics in which long-term thinking is absent. This section is eloquently and convincingly argued.

Howker and Malik’s overarching point is that Britain’s youth has been bequeathed the following odious legacy: an inaccessible housing ladder; a job market in which job-hunters are ill-equipped to compete and with the possibility, at best, of securing a demeaning internship; little inheritance, if at all (and often debt); and a short-termist political framework incapable of long-term planning. For those in the 18–30 category, it’s a rather depressing read.

Unfortunately, the proposed practical solutions are not as convincing as the preceding analysis. The issue at hand is one of implementation: how do we create a long-termist political structure in the face of baby-boomer demographic preponderance? How do we stabilise the employment and housing markets? The authors’ primary solution is the need for a change in socio-political discourse:

We need some new words, and some new thinking that refers not to “rights” but to the practical issues that matter to us; an approach that’s not short-term and myopic, but that will restore the proper functions of politics by placing the future at the heart of our democracy (204).

The authors suggest that long-termist thinking will be restored to politics once a discourse of ‘benefits and obligations’ takes hold. This will, according to the authors, create a more productive democratic dialogue concerning the relationship between past, present, and future generations than the concept of ‘rights and responsibilities’ – the hegemonic understanding of the relationship between state and society since Blair – was able to accomplish. But what about the authors’ earlier admission that the political will of the baby boomers continues to cause politicians to trip over each other in trying to tailor policies to this politically privileged group? In fact, what *would* convince any rational politician to espouse such a language in view of the fact that such a strategy would not appeal to the demographically preponderant baby-boomer generation? The historical record shows that the last time the shackles of populism were broken in favour of principled politics by a mainstream party – Labour party manifesto of 1983 – the result was the infamous “longest

suicide note in history” (BBC, 2003). This experience has long functioned in British politics as a sober reality-check for any potential renegades in parliament foolhardy enough to ignore populist opinion. The authors themselves note that the 2010 general election was one of the most shameless displays of populist politics on record. No new language. No new politics.

If the new language won’t become part of the standard lexicon adopted in civil society and by the political establishment because of its damaging implications for the interests of the most important cross-section of the electorate, then what is to be done? If politics is dominated by the interests of baby-boomers, can the jilted generation, in Britain’s ‘Big Society’, learn to help themselves?

Howker and Malik’s main self-help recommendation with regard to housing is based on the successful scheme set up by the community group London Citizens, which proposes that citizens should act collectively to secure affordable property. In a nutshell, community trusts should buy land in a local area and promise never to sell it. Affordable housing, exclusively for local residents and built to a good standard, could then be built on the land. The trusts would remain the property of the communities at all times, thus providing affordable housing for present and future generations.

The query that arises is whether this provides a solution to the *national* problem. For example, although the idea could work well in a number of local contexts, it is a well-known fact that the UK is facing an acute shortage of land on which to build new homes (Wright, 2011). In light of this, how can we reasonably expect that community trusts will be able to afford the land on which to build affordable housing? And if private developers buy the land, how can communities respond? Options are clearly limited without state intervention in a free-market scenario. The situation is compounded by the fact that the state machinery is largely the property of the baby boomers who cannot be relied upon to support any scheme or political project that works against their own interests. Unfortunately, the space afforded to this review is not sufficient to treat the other proposals made by Howker and Malik. However, it suffices to say that many of them fall foul of the same practical difficulty: where can the political backing be found for labour-market reform, political reform and the realisation of a

generationally fair inheritance system? The logical corollary of their preceding analysis is that the strength of backing for such reforms is too weak to force real change.

The authors should be afforded generous praise for producing an elucidating and multi-faceted generational narrative of contemporary British social, political and economic life. The book's well-reasoned and sober conclusions cast a fresh perspective on the castigated, but often misunderstood behaviour of youth. Even though the solutions are not entirely persuasive, there is a more important

aspect that the book accomplishes: it is a call for readers to think in generational terms and, more broadly, about the long-term.

*Ed Howker and Shiv Malik (2010): Jilted Generation. How Britain Has Bankrupted its Youth. London: Icon Books Ltd. 256 pages. ISBN: 1848311982. Price £8.99.*

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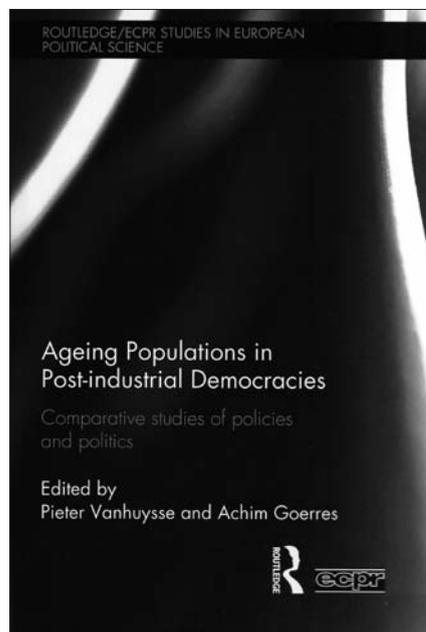
## Pieter Vanhuyse and Achim Goerres (eds.): Ageing Populations in Post-industrial Democracies

*Reviewed by David Kingman*

The politics of ageing has received an increased amount of attention from political scientists in recent years, motivated by relatively new concerns over the impact that ageing will have on the generational balance of power in highly developed democratic nations. This effect has been observed in the elections held by European countries; for example, at the time of the 2001 UK general election, retired people accounted for one-fifth of eligible voters, and there was a 70% turnout rate among this age cohort, compared to 39% among those aged 18-24 (Davidson, 2005).

This book, edited by Pieter Vanhuyse and Achim Goerres, is a collection of articles which examine different aspects of the relationship between age and political power in advanced nations. In particular, several of the papers question whether older people show a greater inclination to vote following their logical self-interest, in support of parties who promise them more generous age-related benefits, or whether their voting decisions are based on a more complex range of factors.

The article by Seán Hanley addresses one of the most obvious manifestations of pensioners' political self-interest: the rise of pensioners' parties in both Western and Eastern Europe. He compares a range of factors using the Qualitative Comparative Analysis method to assess the likelihood of a pensioners' party arising within a particular political system, and how likely it is to obtain



a measure of support. The results revealed that three factors were particularly important in the establishment of pensioners' parties within West European political systems: a high level of self-organisation amongst the retired age cohort (through voluntary organisations, charities and pressure groups); a high level of government spending directed towards older people; and a demand for greater representation, created by a popular sense that existing political parties do not represent pensioners' interests powerfully enough. The more successful pensioners' parties have emerged within political systems where all these factors coalesce, while

conversely, these factors suggest that pensioners' parties are likely to remain of marginal political significance in systems such as the UK's, where a small number of large, monolithic parties seek to represent the interests of the broadest possible range of voters.

However, even if retired people don't start forming their own political parties to represent their interests, there is perceived to be a danger that their numerical weight at the ballot box will encourage mainstream political parties to pander disproportionately to their interests, at the expense of policies which would benefit the younger generation. Yet the interesting chapter by Jennifer Dabbs Sciubba suggests this isn't always the case. She compares recent labour market reforms enacted by the three major developed countries with the most advanced population ageing – Germany, Japan and Italy – and argues that their leaders have all pursued a course which was broadly beneficial to the young, and actually damaged the interests of the older section of the labour force. She does recognise that this may simply be a result of their respective national governments waking up to the dire financial prospects created by their demography, and realising that creating jobs more efficiently for young people will be vital to support the rest of the welfare state, so it may be that these reforms merely damaged the interests of older workers in order to help pensioners, an even older section of the society. As is to be expected, the specificities of the reforms in