

Civil Society and Ageing

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Inspired by an astonishing development - the addition of a *whole generation* to the average person's life span during the past century in countries otherwise as different as Japan, France and the United States - the following remarks present a case for thinking about the figure of the old person as historically contingent, as a time-and space-bound identity born of civil society (*Zivilgesellschaft*) in its modern sense. To speak of the elderly and civil society in the same breath is to venture intellectually into territory where little research has so far been carried out. The journey may prove worthwhile, if only for the reason famously outlined by Arthur Koestler: altered perceptions of our world often flow from the act of juxtaposing two previously unrelated terms, concepts, or problems. So let us conduct an experiment in the stretching of mental boundaries by bringing together the key terms - 'civil society' and 'the elderly' - to see whether our descriptive, strategic and normative understanding of both contemporary civil societies and the elderly can be enriched.

The invention of ageing

Questions about the status of ageing have arisen only in contexts touched by the hands of civil society. From roughly the sixteenth century, the growth in the European region of geographically dense networks of non-governmental institutions - free towns, markets, independent churches, publishers, scientific and literary associations - protected by parliaments, written constitutions, periodic elections and other mechanisms of representative government, was not only bound up historically with a dramatic transformation of family life. The emergence of civil society was itself a key to understanding the invention of the special status of being old, or elderly (the category of senior citizen was a much later neologism). Put simply, the category of 'the elderly' belongs to the universe of thinking, language and action structured by what many observers (by the last quarter of the eighteenth century) came to call 'civil' or 'civilised' society. The new universe profoundly transformed the way many people regarded old age.

Once upon a time, the idea of old age as a contingent and, hence, alterable phase of life simply didn't exist. Every culture of course held views about people approaching the end of their lives. In some tribal societies, for instance, powerful gerontocracies ruled, with elderly men dominating tribal and household affairs, with younger men

and women relegated to the margins of power. In other societies, the practice of ancestor worship extended to the veneration of the old as mystical repositories of folklore and wisdom; old women, for instance, were seen to possess special knowledge of matters like childbirth and pregnancy. Yet there was always a compulsion to think of old people as naturally doomed to die, or as naturally decrepit, as beings whose fates ultimately depended upon a deity or deities. Hence the commonplace practice of parricide as a means of sons obtaining access to family land; and the accusations of witchcraft directed at old women suspected of harbouring potent knowledge.

In the European region, the belief in the absolute primacy of nature had the effect of suppressing awareness of the continuities and discontinuities in the transition towards old age. Old people were viewed simply as spent adults. The picture was reinforced by the male-centred 'ages of man' imagery inherited from classical antiquity (think of famous paintings like Titian's *The Three Ages of Man* [1512] and Hans Baldung Grien's *The Three Ages of Man and Death* [1539]). The immutability of old age was nurtured as well by the parallels that were sometimes drawn between the stages of life and the behaviour of the seven planets, or the parallels that were shaped by the belief in the four humours. Certain strands of Christianity reinforced the sense of aging as an ineluctably 'natural' process, as did literature, for instance Shakespeare's *All's Well, that Ends Well* [1601-8], in which the King of France speaks of 'haggish age' stealing life and wearing out action.

The language and institutions of civil society challenged this mentality of fatalism. The sixteenth century was a particularly decisive watershed in this respect. The causal links between the fate of old people and the push for constitutional government underpinned by vibrant civil societies oiled by commerce and exchange and Christian norms of conjugal duty were certainly complicated, but the clear consequence was that civil society (as it was called from the time of the revolutionary events in the American colonies) became associated with the nurturing of a new category of beings called 'the elderly'. This 'discovery' of the elderly was in fact no 'discovery' of a pre-existing terrain. The simile is wrong: the categorisation of old people as elderly was rather an *invention* of certain social groups, principally of middle class lawyers, philosophers, ministers of religion and public moralists who felt the ground of

certainty shaking under their feet, who sensed that the abandonment of old patterns of authority, the advance of market forces and the push for self-government all required special treatment of old people, so that they could be prepared for the shock - and the opportunities - of civil society and self-government.

Who exactly were the social carriers, the prime movers of this invention of the elderly? The task of pinning down the conceptual transformations that form part of the history of ageing is not easy, if only because there is an obvious problem of sources. In their diaries, letters and autobiographies, members of the literate and educated elites and upwardly mobile groups left behind traces of their thoughts and feelings about old people; by contrast, the ways in which (for instance) the vast majority of the population, peasants and rural and urban labourers, regarded old people have passed into oblivion. The evidence that has survived however suggests that among the first to express sustained interest in older people and their proper place in an emergent civil society were Protestant circles clustered around Luther, the Protestants of the Low Countries and the English Puritans. The contributions of these rising lower middle class believers to the invention of 'the elderly' sometime during the sixteenth century was initially justified using many different and conflicting labels, including Christian duty, civility, civilization, civil society, the commonwealth, the order of liberty, the republic and education. But the quarantining effects linked to these epithets - the demarcation of 'the old' as a category of people worthy of special enquiry and treatment - were pronounced and, historically speaking, without precedent. Old people were no longer principally seen as slaves of their bodies, frail and devilish creatures tainted by the sin that began at the time of creation, an original weakness that was subsequently passed down from generation to generation (a view that lingered for a long time, often being associated with the theology of St Augustine). Old people were also no longer principally regarded as adults exhausted by nature. Old people instead became *objects* of adult definition and adult psychological interest and moral solicitude.

Let us take a few examples. David Haycock's *Mortal Coil: A Short History of Living Longer* (2007) shows that roughly four hundred years ago, European scientists, philosophers, physicians and writers began to define and explore the quest for the prolongation of human life. It was a project that intrigued Sir Francis Bacon and

underpinned various scientific revolutions; ideas of ultimate perfectibility, indefinite progress and worldly rather than heavenly immortality, later fed directly into the spirit of the Enlightenment and the birth of disciplines such as medicine and psychology – featuring figures like René Descartes, Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Swift - and subsequently into today’s world of bio-genetic research, cryonics and other fields that continue to search for the same elusive philosopher’s stone.

The public fascination with the figure of the *puer senex*, the rare male child prodigy who behaved from the beginning like an old man, serves as another example of the Gestalt switch in the perception of ageing bound up with the rise of civil societies. The fascination with old young people was in effect a preoccupation with freaks that defied the rules of an era in which the young were deemed non-adults and the old were naturally a spent force. Thomas Williams Malkin was a much talked-about example. According to his father’s testimony (Benjamin Heath Malkin, *A Father’s Memoirs of his Child* [London 1806]), he was born in 1795, started his career at the age of three, proved himself to be an expert linguist at four, an outstanding philosopher at five, and then began reading the fathers of the church at six, only to die of old age and excess at seven.

By the end of the eighteenth century, popular interest in the compression and blurring of ‘the three ages of man’ implied not only a deep consciousness of the possible contingency of aging, but also a deep desire to do something about it. Hints to this effect are evident for instance in La Rochefoucauld’s *Maximes* (1665). ‘Few people know how to be old’, he wrote, a thought that was soon to be expressed at length in Thomas Paine’s *Agrarian Justice opposed to Agrarian Law, and to Agrarian Monopoly* (1795/6). Written in reply to the Bishop of Llandaff’s sermon praising the division between rich and poor as a sign of God’s wisdom, the remarkable tract targeted the class of *nouveaux riches* then emerging as the ruling element in post-Jacobin France. In contrast to the Jacobin dictatorship, which had preached austerity, the new Thermidoreans (said Paine) were discovering private freedoms, mixed with market pleasures. Civil society was reborn, but the return to *laissez-faire* split it into rich and poor. The widening inequality Paine considered shameful, and he likened the division between poor and rich to ‘dead and living bodies chained together’. But against the apologists of poverty, he insisted that the problem was remediable.

Poverty is not God's will. It is an artificial, humanly produced blight. 'It is wrong to say that God made *Rich* and *Poor*', wrote Paine, 'he made only *Male* and *Female*; and he gave them the earth for their inheritance.' This principle that the earth is 'the COMMON PROPERTY OF THE HUMAN RACE' implied that the propertied rich had an obligation to help the poor, not by charity alone, but by accepting a government-administered inheritance tax system designed to redistribute and equalise income. Paine did not say what would be done with recalcitrant property owners and their families who refused to acknowledge the common property right, let alone pay their share of death duties; the problem of strikes by the wealthy against redistributive policies had to be faced by later social reformers. Paine instead sketched a plan for setting up a National Fund out of which every man and woman reaching twenty-one years of age would be eligible for a compensatory one-off payment of fifteen pounds sterling, while every person reaching fifty years of age would receive a annual citizen's pension of ten pounds.

Ageing and Politics

Paine's image of old age as a phase of life that contained within it different and potentially better options was a pioneering effort at thinking practically about a new politics of the elderly. His emphasis on the need to civilise civil society by alleviating the experience of malnutrition and the fear of starvation and uselessness that still gripped the bulk of the elderly among Europe's peasantry, craftspeople and urban workers and vagrants stood in marked contrast (for instance) to Hegel's image of the family, which pictured the domestic as the foundation of civil society and the 'first ethical root of the state', as a sphere of sensuous reciprocity, of harmony nourished by unadulterated love. The image was greatly idealised, and the spirit of Paine's contrary perspective was to gain ground, for instance in the nineteenth-century campaigns by friendly societies, the labour movement and pensioners to win support for retirement policies and state pensions designed to improve the living conditions of growing numbers of older people pushed from gainful employment into retirement, simply because there were no jobs for them. Political successes were eventually to come, for instance in the pioneering pension schemes ratified by law in Germany in 1889, Denmark in 1891 and New Zealand in 1898.

The demands to do something about the status of the elderly in civil society had many and various and interesting effects, ranging from the early twentieth-century invention of gerontology as a field of study of ageing from the biological, psychological and socio-economic perspective to an important trend that is today by no means completed: the emergence of a politics of old age. We are living in times in which both the background historical relationship between civil society and the elderly and the contemporary flourishing of civil societies freed at least temporarily from the burdens of war are together fuelling a deep politicisation of ageing. The fields of old age come to be churned up by public controversies and policy initiatives as never before.

On a scale not previously witnessed by so many people, the experience of being old comes widely to be seen as contingent. The de-naturing effects of this trend are manifest in various ways: the quiet erosion of patronising silence (often called ‘respect’) and neglect of older people as useless burdens; the withering of monistic presumptions about old people’s inevitable frailty and death; a corresponding widening of the repertoire of images and interpretations of what it means to be old. The emerging kaleidoscope of views about old age suggests that the grip of the metronome on older people’s lives is weakening; that means that the linear compulsion to carve up their lives into equal days, days into equal hours, hours into equal minutes and seconds, is beginning to be counter-balanced by the introduction of novelty and the corresponding multiplication of different time frames (to speak in the language of Michael Young’s *The Metronomic Society* [1988]). It might even be said that old age is becoming so pluralized that ‘old age’ is no more. The spaces that are opening up for different definitions of the experience of seniority enable some people, for the first time, to find a voice in the public square, even to win political and legal protection for their claims. The elderly become denizens or *proto-citizens* of civil society.

A variety of contradictory forces currently propel this de-naturing and ‘politicization’ of old age, whose manifold effects are plain to see. In countries otherwise as different as the United States, Canada, Germany and Japan, average life expectancy has been rising some 2½ years each decade for the past 4 decades, one consequence of which is to break down the lock-step life course - youth followed by middle age followed by

old age. Silver civil societies emerge in which a 'mid course generation' (Phyllis Moen) of people between roughly the age of 50 and 70 are living healthier, more vigorous and 'youthful' lives for the first time. No longer biologically and socially immutable, old age has become a building site, a phase of life that is up for grabs in every sense. The tacit assumption that 'old people' or 'the elderly' have common interests - because they are ill, frail, demented - is breaking down. The term 'ageism' (coined in 1968) has been let loose on the world. There is much talk of productive ageing; of the elderly as important custodians of memory; and evidence is growing in some countries that older people are acting as material supporters of younger people, so defying the traditional view that old people are a burden on the young. There are calls to break down the image of the elderly as interested only in knitting, gardening, fireside chats and reading, to widen the structures of opportunity available to the elderly; and new proposals for supporting the frail elderly in acknowledgement of their basic rights as citizens to enjoy respect with dignity.

Incivilities

This last theme reminds us that for older people contemporary civil societies are no paradise on earth. There is no golden age of senescence, either in the past or the present. When civil societies function well, it is true that they provide meaningful spaces for the elderly to live meaningful lives in new and socially interesting ways. The strategic and normative case for linking questions about ageing with civil society is strong, and has important research and policy implications. A positive example: civil society can help to offset a major curse of older age, bad luck. Luck can be cruelly undemocratic. Through simple twists of fate, frailty and/or disablement can suddenly hit us while our peers are meanwhile still behaving like adolescents. The dense networks of solidarity and self-help available through a well-functioning civil society cannot magically reverse bad luck, but they can help ease the feeling of older people that though they are lucky still to be alive, being old resembles either an unlucky dip or a life sentence in prison after luckily escaping hanging. These networks of solidarity can help dissolve this feeling of disappointment and bitterness, along with the dysphoria of loneliness - the broken hearts and inactivity and illness - that physical bad luck often breeds.

Another example of the mollifying effects of civil society: when they function well, civil societies can encourage a Gestalt switch in the way we see our final years, especially by encouraging a sense of humour and irony, a capacity to poke our tongue at the inevitability of our dying and eventual death. José Saramago's wonderfully imaginative *Death at Intervals* (2008) is something of an anthem for this sensibility. It can be seen as a reply to the desperate advice once dispensed by the poet, Dylan Thomas: 'Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.' By contrast, Saramago's fable invites us to imagine a civil society where one day, without warning, people stop dying. The break with the inevitable has dramatic effects. The undertaking industry adapts by going into the business of arranging funerals for animals. Insurance companies spend their time wriggling out of guaranteed coverage of the permanently undying. Those old people who try to act as if they were sitting by the fireside telling stories to their grandchildren are ridiculed. Some people euthanize the living dead by transporting them to places where death remains active. The terminally ill are petrified by death's obsolescence. People begin to ask themselves questions: how can we exist without mortality? If we cannot imagine death, let alone what comes after death, then what point is there in religion? Do we have the right to take our own lives? Do we have an obligation to help others who wish to, but cannot?

Saramago's satire touches sensitive spots because it prompts us to imagine a civil society populated by living dead or 'overaged' people confronted by tough basic questions about what they want out of life. Put differently: the postponement of death prompts questions about how to cultivate life and the preconditions of improving its quality. The point is that the unprecedented extension of life expectancy that is going on in our lifetime by no means automatically strengthens or enriches civil society. Judged in terms of criteria like non-violence, the celebration of pluralism, the widespread enjoyment of complex forms of freedom and equality, actually existing civil societies are by no means as civil as they could be, or pretend to be.

The first-ever WHO global report on violence, published in 2002, estimates that at least 6% of older people have been the victims of violence. The estimate is probably too low. There is growing awareness that the revolution in longevity is not just a rich country affair, but a world-wide phenomenon; more than 60 per cent of people over

sixty reside in poorer countries, a percentage that will soon rise to around 80 per cent, while one-fifth of the world's older people now live in China. There is rising awareness too that in the richest countries people - women, disproportionately - do not arrive at the gates of the autumn of their lives with equal resources in hand. The spectre of old age destitution is looming. The trend towards material insecurity for some aging people is compounded by their mounting anxieties about the viability of the pension and health care systems that are supposed to care for them, if indeed they have access to such care systems, which many do not.

Growing numbers of older people are also faced with the challenge of personally coping with one of the darkest and least-discussed trends: the growing mismatch between rising total life expectancy and *healthy* life expectancy. In the richest parts of the world, the average lifespan has reached 78 years. If present trends persist, as has happened for over a century now, most people born today will live to the age of 100 years. In an effort to make sense of the trend, Guy Brown's *The Living End: The Future of Death, Aging and Immortality* (2008) has recently argued that death is being transformed from a 'digital' event - a sudden switching off of a light, due to infectious disease, heart attack or accident - into an 'analogue' process that rather resembles the slow elimination of light using a dimmer. What this means is that many people are now faced with the prospect of spending their final years on a miserable slow-motion journey towards degradation and darkness. There is nothing inevitable about either the degradation or the darkness. The economics of the pharmaceutical industry play a part, if only because its profits are enhanced by manufacturing drugs that turn acute sources of physical death into chronic diseases, thus turning people into patients for life. Government health policies reinforce the trend by investing disproportionately in campaigns to prevent heart attacks and infectious diseases. The upshot is that growing numbers of ageing people are left to tackle the effects of ageing on their own. They experience, as no previous generation has experienced, the painful subdivision of dying and death into its component parts. They learn first hand what it means to cope with the death of reproduction, the death of erotic desire, the death of the ability to run and jump, the death of memory, the death of laughter, the death of playfulness, the death of the will to live. The growing disjunction between their biological lives and their autobiographical lives - their felt ability to tell themselves and others coherent stories featuring themselves as central characters with unique and meaningful

qualities – is unlikely to be solved by technological breakthroughs. The pain and misery it brings most certainly will be exacerbated by the common experience of confinement in hospitals, unfriendly places where withered and worn out bodies are kept alive by virile machines, switches, wires and tubes.

A New Politics?

Faced with both old injustices and new injustices with a new bite, people on the road to old age are slowly but surely being confronted with political questions unknown to their parents, grandparents and great grandparents. Whether or how likely it is that silver citizens will see things in political terms - whether they will take seriously what the great demographer Peter Laslett once called ‘processional justice’ - is of course another matter. Plenty of research seems to raise doubts about whether senior citizens will take up these questions, and act on them publicly. Some observers speak of the break-up of ‘the elderly’, their subdivision into a large underclass of politically marginal and physically and mentally disabled old people incarcerated in homes for the aged, hospitals and other institutions, and a small ‘gerontocracy’ of relatively well to do retired and semi-retired people who, in some countries, act as a sizeable group of voters capable of wielding considerable political clout, mostly to keep things as they are. Other observers cast doubt on such scenarios. In their view, the sub-division of elderly people can and will be avoided by raising the age of retirement, encouraging the elderly to help the young caring for their children, supplementary pensions and other intelligently crafted reforms of the welfare state.

Both sets of observers appear to underestimate the novelty and perplexities of the emerging situation. It is true that ‘age warfare’ is not on the political agenda; it is most unlikely that the elderly will come to be seen as a millstone around the necks of the younger generation, and the younger generation an open threat to older people. It is also true that a war against the plague of ageing will ever succeed. Those who think that so-called SENS - strategies for engineered negligible senescence - make sense are bound to be disappointed. Engineered wellness, the dramatic extension of lives lived in an unending summer of health and vigour, is not on the horizon. For that reason alone, it is therefore safe to say that there are no inherent tendencies leading towards intra-generational or intergenerational equilibrium. In an era (in the United States)

when more than 50 per cent of people over 85 are still mobile and independent, it is most improbable that senior citizens, using the resources of civil society, media and democratic representation, will somehow roll over and die. It seems unlikely that the elderly will never get around to confronting the growing problems they face, that they will instead take comfort in private solutions, such as exercise and weight training, supplemental calcium, oestrogen replacement and drinking red wine to ensure a good daily diet of resveratrol, a compound supposed to have anti-cancer and anti-inflammatory properties. Prolonged participation in labour markets (thought by many mainstream observers to be a great panacea for so many ailments, despite the particular burdens it places on women) and/or involvement in 'voluntary' and philanthropic contributions to civil society (the conservative image of how community-spirited people with time on their hands should spend the remaining part of their lives) are unlikely to keep them quiet. The age of grumpy old men, kind old ladies and tittle-tattles clutching teacups in rocking chairs is over. If that is so, then in Europe and elsewhere the historians of the future are likely to tell us about something else that is novel about our times: the rise of new types of political initiatives led by senior citizens and their representatives unsatisfied with the way things are.