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The fourth age and the concept of a 'social imaginary': A theoretical excursus

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the idea of the 'fourth age' as a form of social imaginary. During the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond, the cultural framing of old age and its modern institutionalisation within society began to lose some of its former chronological coherence. The 'pre-modern' distinction made between the *status* of 'the elder' and the *state* of 'senility' has re-emerged in the 'late modern' distinction between the 'third' and the 'fourth' age. The centuries-old distaste for and fear of old age as 'senility' has been compounded by the growing medicalization of later life, the emergence and expansion of competing narratives associated with the third age, and the progressive 'densification' of the disabilities within the older institutionalised population. The result can be seen as the emergence of a 'late modern' social imaginary deemed as the fourth age. This paper outlines the theoretical evolution of the concept of a social imaginary and demonstrates its relevance to aging studies and its applicability to the fourth age.

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Introduction

The distinction between a third and a fourth age was made salient in social gerontology by Peter Laslett, in his book, *A Fresh Map of Life* (Laslett, 1989). It has been linked to the earlier distinction made by Bernice Neugarten between the 'young–old' and the 'old–old' (Neugarten, 1974). While such distinctions can help make sense of the changing nature of later life in contemporary society, these terms have limitations if viewed primarily in chronological or demographic terms (Baltes & Smith, 2003: 124-5). Rather than treating the third age and the fourth age as equivalent terms representing chronologically bound, successive stages in the modern adult life course, it is possible to understand these terms as representing *different paradigms* for the understanding of later life. Other approaches have sought to interpret old age through concepts such as 'disengagement' (Cumming & Henry, 1961) or 'structured dependency' (Townsend, 1981) in order to frame the experiences of older people in ways that reflect their diminished status. Approaching old age through the prism of the third and fourth ages shifts this focus. For Gilleard and Higgs the third age is a generationally defined 'cultural field' which emphasises the values of choice, autonomy, self expression and pleasure (Gilleard & Higgs, 2009). These features are captured in the later lifestyles of older people where the combination of consumerism, cultural engagement, the pursuit of leisure and an engagement with the technologies of self-care has carved out a distinctly different set of coordinates for later life than those envisaged by earlier commentators. While often seen as complementary to the concept of the third age, the fourth age, however, is not an alternative cultural field. While the term has become widely used (Grenier, 2012), from Gilleard and Higgs' perspective, the fourth age can be better understood as representative of a feared 'state of becoming', an ascribed community of otherness, set apart from the everyday experiences and practices of later life (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010; Hazan, 2002). Its epigenetic 'otherness' is reflected through its representation within third person narratives by themes of abjection, frailty and marginalization (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011a). While such a distinction between

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the ways that these two paradigms operate might appear to be primarily of scholarly interest, we would counter that making such a theoretical distinction is needed to better understand the complexities of and fractures within contemporary later life and its disparate representations. To make the difference between the third age and the fourth age clearer it is possible to posit that while the former can be understood as constituting a cultural field which can be studied in relation to the everyday practices of older people, the latter constitutes not so much a set of practices but a 'social imaginary' which operates as a set of often unstated but powerful assumptions concerning the dependencies and indignities of 'real' old age. While much has been written about the cultural practices of the third age (Gilleard & Higgs, 2009, 2013) much less has been written about the fourth age and its representation as a social imaginary of old age. In what follows we intend to describe how the term 'social imaginary' has come to prominence in contemporary social thought and how using it in the field of aging studies can help deepen our understanding of the contemporary fractures in later life.

Social imaginaries: origins

Sociologists of very many different hues have long been interested in the processes by which societies understand themselves and how this affects social institutions and social interactions. While the debates on this subject are profuse and detailed it is also the case that certain concepts seem more useful than others in carrying out particular tasks. To this end in trying to fully understand the nature of the fourth age, Gilleard and Higgs (2010) were drawn to the idea of the social imaginary because it seemed to offer a richer set of ideas than other approaches that operated on the same terrain, such as ideology or discourse. To appreciate why it may be fruitful to consider the fourth age as a social imaginary it is necessary to examine the origins and development of this particular concept.

The term 'social imaginary' originated with the French theorist Cornelius Castoriadis in his book, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Castoriadis, 1987). In this book, he argues that all social institutions possess a central imaginary, situated 'on the level of elementary symbols or of global meaning' that links the functions of social institutions with their symbolic forms. '[E]very society', he writes, 'posits a "view of itself" which is at the same time a "view of the world" … [which]… is part of its truth or its reflected reality…without being reducible to it' (Castoriadis, 1987: 39). As social institutions are necessarily human inventions, their particular functions are inevitably invested with symbolic meaning that makes sense of their functioning within the broader structures of society. Taking a structuralist position he contends that social institutions can only be understood through the organisation or network of signifiers and signified that is held within the social imaginary.

Seeking to articulate the role of the individual in the creation, maintenance and change of social institutions, Castoriadis sought to express the human 'invention' of these symbolic inter-relationships, reflecting "the basic irreducibility of the social, the fact that what the social is and the way in which it is, has no analogue anywhere else" (Castoriadis, 1987: 182). Society is, in this sense, an invented system of social institutions that are never fixed but are always open to new configurations. Their socio-historical specificity only comes into existence because of the underlying 'radical imagination' which human beings *as human beings* possess (Castoriadis, 1987: 281). The social imaginary is thus a necessary product of psychic life.

At the same time Castoriadis eschews any idea of a 'fundamentalist' nature of human beings that pre-determines the institutions of society. While he does not deny a relationship between what he calls 'the natural stratum' of the psyche and the institutions of society, his point is that 'nature' serves neither as cause nor symbol of society's organisation but is itself caught up with, and transformed by, the existence of the social imagination (Castoriadis, 1987: 354). He extends this argument by pointing out that:

> "The institution of society is as it is to the extent that it 'materialises' a magma of social imaginary significations in reference to which individual and objects alone can be grasped and even simply exist [and which is] through the actuality of the individuals, acts and objects that they 'inform'" (Castoriadis, 1987:356).

As has been pointed out, Castoriadis' ideas about social imaginaries reflect a theme or trope that operates throughout the sociological tradition, the search for an organising principle around which societies are structured — how they exist as well as the various and changing forms in which they exist. This search for the social level of society, one that is neither reducible to individual action nor that merely expresses the sum of social institutions is evident in the earliest sociological thinking. Thus the idea of the social imaginary has many similarities with Durkheim's concept of the *conscious collective* which represented the shared ideas and beliefs of a society (Durkheim, 1964). For Durkheim the *conscious collective* being fundamentally social in nature was neither reducible to nor derived from individual consciousness (Fournier, 2013:303; Jones, 1986: 17). Despite the apparent simplicity of this formulation, there is debate about what Durkheim meant by this formulation. Sometimes he seems to be referring to common beliefs and sentiments, while at other moments he is alluding to common rules. Significantly, the term was abandoned in his later work in favour of the more culturally oriented 'collective représentations' (Jones, 1986: 17; K. Thompson, 1982: 61). He described collective representations as "the way in which the group conceives of itself in its relationships with the objects which affect it", in short as the way society conceived or imagined itself (Durkheim, 1982: 40). As is well known, his desire to lay the foundations of the new science of sociology meant that the form taken by *collective representations* could be derived only from an analysis of the society in which they arose, and not from the workings of individual minds (Durkheim, 1982: 42).

Durkheim's conceptualisation in turn shares similarities with the classical Marxist notion of 'ideology' in its concern to describe the representation of society (Pearce, 1989; Strawbridge, 1982). Despite "the varying and not entirely compatible ways in which Marx… used the concept of ideology" (Barrett, 1991: 157), Marx's approach has been widely used as a framework for

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