



The appraisal of difference: Critical gerontology and the active-ageing-paradigm

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the re-negotiation of old age in current times of flexible capitalism and its analysis by Critical Gerontologists who criticize this process as age denial and midlife-imperialism. Starting out from the instructive critique of active ageing and consumer-based anti-ageing strategies, rooted in the heterogeneous field of Critical Gerontology, the here presented contribution aims at critically reviewing and discussing this critique. The article exposes theoretical pitfalls that make this critique run into a dead-end, since old age tends to be homogenized and sometimes even naturalized within Critical Gerontology: Though certainly often unintended, the appreciation of old age as being positively different from midlife ends up with sheltering “old people” as “the others” from the impositions of active society. After elaborating on this difference perspective and discussing its problems, I will finally sketch some conceptual ideas, inspired by poststructuralist thinking, on how to overcome the fruitless dichotomy of imperialism/sameness (“they have to be like us”) and difference (“they are the others”).

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Introduction

Discourses describing population ageing as a crisis are omnipresent in Western industrialized countries: there is talk about the collapse of pension schemes, health care and long-term care systems, decreasing economic power and increasing social inflexibility. At the same time, however, there is a popular promise reminiscent of Friedrich Hölderlin's famous lines “where the danger is, also grows the saving power”: Parallel to the picture of elderly people as a dangerous bulk, the non-frail “new elderly” (van Dyk & Lessenich, 2009) have been discovered as potentially active and productive citizens. The notions of active ageing revolve around the idea that these retirees are capable and duty-bound to live a self-reliant life and contribute to the public good (Deutscher Bundestag, 2010; Council of the European Union, 2010). Against this backdrop we have recently witnessed a fundamental socio-political re-

negotiation of old age, which constitutes a major challenge to Gerontology and Ageing Studies.

The popular focus on the able-bodied “young-old” or “new elderly” comes along with the appraisal of their (ongoing) “sameness” in terms of achievement-based midlife-norms and capacities. Traditionally inclined to overcome the deficit model of old age, it is not surprising, *prima facie*, that many gerontologists have quite openly joined the coalition that sings the praise of the “new elderly”, their virtues and resources. This approving stance more or less characterizes the mainstream of gerontology, which I will – deliberately simplifying – call “Happy Gerontology”: This term, borrowed from Noberto Bobbio,¹ suggests that Happy Gerontologists tend to promote positive views on old age by neglecting frailty, dementia and hardship, while stressing the continuities between midlife and independent/active later life at the same time.

¹ In his essay “Of old age – De Senectute Bobbio complains: “The ‘happy science’ of geriatrics considerably fosters, though unwillingly and meaning well, the disguise of the maladies of senility.” (Bobbio, 2006: 60, author's translation).

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It is up to streams of Critical Gerontology to take a contrary view: Diverse as they are, rooted in a wide range of theoretical perspectives, Critical Gerontologists reflect on the neoliberal framing of old age activation as well as the exclusive character of achievement- and continuity-based positive images of ageing. After briefly presenting the rise of the active-ageing-paradigm (2) and summarizing the critical objections against it (3), it is the aim of this article to critically revisit and evaluate the arguments of Critical Gerontologists (4). Without denying their credits of having challenged the model of active ageing, I will expose theoretical pitfalls that lead the critique of the Happy Gerontology's "sameness promise" into the dead-end of a homogenized difference: Though certainly often unintended, the appraisal of old age as being positively different from midlife ends up with sheltering "old people" from impositions of active society. After elaborating on the roots of this difference perspective and discussing its problems I will finally (5) sketch some conceptual ideas on how to overcome the fruitless dichotomy of sameness ("they have to be like us") and difference ("they are the others"). The article aims at broadening the view at the polyphonic field of age and ageing without thereby dismissing the critique of neoliberal active ageing.

Active ageing — the renegotiation of old age

There is a broad range of actors promoting active and productive ageing, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the European Union, the OECD and the United Nations. Back in 1999, which was declared the "International Year of Older Persons" by the United Nations, the European Commission urged its member states to change "outmoded practices" in relation to older persons: "Both within labour markets and after retirement, there is the potential to facilitate the making of greater contributions from people in the second half of their lives" (European Commission, 1999: 21) and the UN stated: "The potential of older persons is a powerful basis for future development. This enables society to rely increasingly on the skills, experience and wisdom of older persons, not only to take the lead in their own betterment but also to participate actively in that of society as a whole." (UN, 2002: Article 10) Though adopted in diverse ways due to different institutional settings and national retirement cultures and despite a variety of labels², there is agreement on a general tendency towards old age activation in Western industrialized countries (Davey & Glasgow, 2006; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Sherradon, 2001; Moulaert & Biggs, 2012; van Dyk & Lessenich, 2009). The crisis discourse on demographic ageing merges with discourses on the exhaustion of the welfare state, which together make up the argument that the rising amount of elderly people threatens intergenerational solidarity. The idea of "earned retirement" as a phase of leisure and repose is increasingly replaced by a moral claim towards retirees to stay productively engaged and to contribute to society (Moody, 2001: 181f.). In re-negotiating the meaning and duty of old age, active ageing is not just conceived of as an economic necessity, but it is presented as a win-win-situation that serves both society as a whole and the elderly themselves: "The beauty of this strategy is that it is good for everyone: from citizens of all

ages as ageing individuals, in terms of maximizing their potential and quality of life, through to society as a whole, by getting the best from human capital [...]" (Walker, 2002: 137)

Next to the postponement of retirement age and the rise of employment rates of older employees aged 55+ according to the Lisbon Strategy (Ney, 2004), the debate is about the extension of care work, mutual aid in neighborhoods, civic engagement and voluntary work as well as lifelong learning. The core areas and concrete policies, however, differ from country to country, with major differences between those countries with a deeply rooted retirement culture of "late freedom" (Rosenmayr, 1983), such as Germany and France, and the Anglo-Saxon countries that abolished mandatory retirement age years ago. Notably the significance of paid work beyond retirement age plays out very differently — empirically as well as normatively (Boudiny, 2012; Scherger, Hagemann, Hokema, & Luc, 2012).

The active-ageing-paradigm is not restricted to hetero-productive activities that directly benefit others, but also encompasses activities that affect the ageing process itself (Walker, 2002: 124f.; WHO, 2002: 12). Whereas for a long time ageing had been regarded a natural process of decline, the plasticity of the ageing process has recently become popular. The broad range of *anti-ageing*-products and -guidebooks as well as the outstanding popularity of the "successful ageing"-concept (Rowe & Kahn, 1998) are the most obvious evidence. The health-related paradigm shift from a primarily curative to a more preventive medical focus has been conducive to new concepts of ageing and their focus on life-long prophylaxis and prevention with regard to mental and physical health (van Dyk & Graefe, 2010). The overlapping concepts of successful and active ageing share the idea that there is not merely a general potential to influence the ageing process in a "positive" way, but an individual responsibility to do so (Davey & Glasgow, 2006).

Active ageing and academic paradigms

While active ageing is fairly new on the political agenda, there is a long gerontological tradition that revolves around the idea that decline in old age is not a natural process but a consequence of the elderly's social disengagement. Confronting the previously influential disengagement theory³, activity theory proclaims life course continuity with older people to be "the same as middle-aged people" (Havighurst, Neugarten, & Tobin, 1968: 161). Activity theory claims that "it is better to be active than to be inactive; to maintain the pattern characteristic of middle age rather than to move to new patterns of old age" (Havighurst Neugarten & Tobin, 1968: 161). As critics have pointed out, activity theory is not just based on a rather loose concept of activity (Katz, 1996: 127) but characterized by an overly optimistic and individualistic account that disregards structural impediments to active continuity and tends to neglect hardship and grievance in (deep) old age. Though object of controversial debates, core ideas of activity theory have remained influential over decades; the rejection of deficit models of age(ing) and the scientific

² On the lack of conceptual clarity of active ageing see Boudiny (2012).

³ "In our theory, aging is an inevitable mutual withdrawal or disengagement, resulting in decreased interaction between the aging person and others in the social systems he belongs to" (Cummings & Henry, 1961: 14f.).

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