ageism

by Paola Giorgis

Abstract:

***Italiano**. Questa voce affronta il tema dell'**età**, dell'**invecchiamento** e delle **discriminazioni basate sull'età** (**ageismo**) considerando come diversi fattori quali **classe sociale**, **genere** ed **etnia** influenzino la **rappresentazione sociale** e l'**esperienza individuale** dell'età matura. Il percorso analizza tali fattori prendendo in esame studi che ne hanno evidenziato l'intersezionalità, mostrando ad esempio come **differenze nello stato di salute** corrispondono a **differenze nella condizione sociale**. La discussione propone quindi alcuni possibili modalità per **affrontare e ribaltare stereotipi e pregiudizi** rivolti verso le persone anziane. Alcuni esempi arrivano dalle* **Raging Grannies** *[le nonne arrabbiate] che manifestano per le strade contro ogni tipo di discriminazione, e dall'analisi militante delle **femministe** che denuncia l'ulteriore discriminazione delle donne anziane. Ma il ribaltamento degli stereotipi può anche avvenire attraverso la loro **spudorata e ironica ostentazione**, come avviene in una puntata dei Simpsons. Infine, viene fatto riferimento a una **iniziativa dell'Organizzazione Mondiale della Sanità** che ha recentemente indetto una campagna contro l'ageismo in senso lato, includendovi anche la discriminazione nei confronti di persone giovani.*

This entry discusses the topic of **age**, **aging** and **ageism** analyzing how factors such as **class, gender** and **race** impact the **social representation** and the **individual experience** of the old age, also proposing some possible ways to challenge stereotypes and prejudices against elderly people.

Etymology:

age: from the Latin *aetas*: period of life, **lifetime**, lifespan;

aging: the **process** of becoming older;

ageism: it refers to the **stereotypes**, **discriminations** or **prejudices against** individuals on the grounds of their **age**. The term, modelled on racism and sexism, was created in 1969 by Robert Neil Butler to define **discrimination against the elderly.**

Though the term **ageism** is now intended as **any form of discrimination based on age**, included that against **young people** (e.g., **too young** to access certain welfare benefits, to be recognized rights at the workplace, to get a fair salary, etc.), here further we will discuss **ageism** in its original - and still most widespread - meaning, that is as a **discrimination against aged individuals.**

Problematization:

Besides being a biological and physiological process, it might seem that **age** – and its work-in-progress, **aging** – is an **individual experience**. Yet, indeed, **it is not**. While apparently occurring at a micro-level, aging is a phenomenon where "economic, political, and sociocultural factors interact to shape and determine the meaning and experience of old age" (Minkler & Estes, 1991/2020).

Age and aging are studied by different branches of knowledge which often work with an interdisciplinary approach. Gerontology is the core discipline; yet, among others, also biology, psychology, medicine, and social studies play a relevant role, showing how **health inequalities** among the elderly are determined by **social inequalities**. Along a similar path are the **global studies**, which expose the huge divide between the Global North and the Global South (not be intended as a geographical dimension, but rather as a socio-economic one), where **factors** such as income, social capital, the access to natural and material resources, the health care system, retirement pensions, social welfare, etc., greatly impact on the **overall conditions of the elderly** and their experience of aging.

In the **comprehensive study on aging** mentioned above, Meredith Minkler and Carrol Estes view **age as a major stratifier** in society together with **class**, **race** and **gender**, all **intersectional factors** which determine the experience of aging. The different authors who contribute to the volume move the focus from the individual experience of aging to the **larger socio-structural issues** that shape and condition "the status, resources and health of the elderly, and even the trajectory of the aging process itself" (Estes, p. 21). Disentangling aging from micro-level and psychological analyses, the authors sustain that the experience of aging is determined by the social, political and economic structure of society. Therefore, they address aging according to a **structural** rather than an **individual perspective,** investigating the role of the state and capital in regarding the elderly.

To analyze the impact on the **experience of aging**, the volume takes into consideration **several factors,** among which are:

- **Class**. Though out of the production system, elderly people are widely impacted by class divide since, in capitalistic economies, they are either dependent on the state benefits (i.e., on the state allocation of resources for health and aging policies), or on private agencies and service providers. The predominant indifferentiated in-group categorization of elderly people polarizes them as 'those-affluent' and 'those-in-need' contributing to reproduce social divide. The **wealthy seniors** are seen as desirable consumers by the market, a move that, instead of empowering the aged people, transforms them in passive audiences of artificial needs and risks to make the low-income elders more invisible, thus further enlarging the divide between social classes. At the other end, the **elderly-in-need** are depicted as competitors within the welfare system, draining resources that could be allocated to other social and age groups. In that regard, the authors speak of an '**age struggle**' or 'age war' as another aspect of the class struggle.
- **Gender**. Women are subjects to **three different types of discrimination:** as **elderly women** (they are considered more dependent than men, and they suffer from a higher degree of invisibility); as **caregivers** (the majority of caregivers are women who come from low socio-economic backgrounds, have few or no labor rights, and are low paid); and as **unpaid familial caregivers** (daughters, daughters-in-law, etc. who perform the work of care to old family members).

Among **other factors** that the different authors examine to define the impact on experience of aging are **race and ethnicity**; the socio-economic conditions of the elderly in the **Global South**; the social construction of **dependency and vulnerability**; the **role of ideology** in shaping how old age is socially and politically understood and treated; the **imbalanced power relations** between different social groups; the issue of health, **aging policies** and the **biomedicalization** [the process that connects biology and medicine] of aging.

To address all these complex and intersectional factors, the authors sustain that the approach of **political economy**, which views aging as a part of larger social structures and socio-historical processes, should be integrated by **moral economies** based on **use value**, in order to develop policies supporting reciprocity, fairness, equity, and age solidarity. The combination of the **political and moral economy** of aging necessitates of a shift towards **social justice** and a vision of goods and services not strictly measurable in terms of production-consumption.

Indeed, how the elderly are considered and treated is the **litmus paper** of a society, of its cultural and moral values, as well as of its capability of promoting and enacting **equal rights** and **dignity** to all its members, **regardless of age.**

Communication strategies:

In this complex and highly polarized panorama on aging as seen above, a recent but powerful major player has recently arrived on the scene: **marketing**. Since a few decades ago, senior citizens were under-represented - if not invisible - to market and advertising.

When they appeared, they were **extremely stereotyped**, as the **granny** giving advice to the young housewife on how to remove stains using bleach but avoiding the fabric wear-and-tear, as in the example here reported at the side.
They were depicted according to what has been called '**visual ageism**', that is the social practice of representing aged people according to prejudices and stereotypes.



youtube/TuttoSpotOttanta

In the last decades, elderly people (who are now a quite large social group, being the baby-boomers of the 1950s and 1960s) have become an **attractive category of consumers** to be groomed and advertised at. In the capitalistic economies based on the production-consumption cycle, affluent seniors might be at the margin of the **production** system, but they are in the perfect condition for **consumption** since they have time and money to spend and spare.

Nowadays, elderly people are thus **widely represented** in advertising. Specific **advertising agencies** offer diversified services to their clients to advise them on how to target elderly people in a more effective way. They also suggest the words to be used to address their potential customers, advising the companies to use the term '**mature**' rather than 'elderly', thus moving the focus from 'age' to the more pleasing concept of 'maturity', which brings forth a reference to solidity, acquired experience and wisdom.

The vast majority of these ads appear on **TV** and on **newspapers**, the two media that are followed by most aged individuals. In fact, though in particular during the Covid-19 pandemic the elderly have by necessity **become** more **acquainted** with **technological devices**, they mainly use them to stay in touch with their relatives and friends, still relying on traditional media for commercial information. In Italy, this is particularly the case of aged people living in small villages or in rural areas where the internet connection can be poor.

Besides the ads of medical products and care services (from individual aids such as wheelchairs, walkers, to the private business of the homes for the elderly), other marketing sectors address the elderly as a **profitable new market**. The 2017 study *L'immagine dei senior tra prodotti e pubblicità* [The image of the seniors between products and advertising] was conducted by the *Osservatorio Senior* - Senior Observatory - of the University of Bologna, Italy, with the collaboration of Bocconi University, Milan, and within the broader project that involves private sectors and associations in investigating aging issues in Italy. The study identified three major areas of marketing for those who are labelled as the 'new seniors' or 'silver': well-being, finance (investments and insurance), and fashion.

Indeed, more and more **marketing sectors** are turning their head towards the elderly. Dedicated travelling and dating agencies, the multi-million anti-aging business – from cosmetic surgery to all the different branches of the industry of well-being – are there **to cuddle their aged consumers**, providing them with the constant fabrication of new products to suit their needs and aspirations.


https://www.guidaviaggio.com/itinerari/vacanze-per-anziani-le-mete-piu-adatte

Several Italian travel websites present specific offers and services to their senior customers, also promising them new experiences and suggesting several 'tips & tricks' for a pleasant and safe holiday, such as which countries to choose to be sure to enjoy the best climate (i. e., not too hot, not too cold).

It has to be noted that, though such advertising strategies work for their own profitable purposes, they contribute to the **reconstruction of the social representation** of the elderly as active, dynamic, energetic people who enjoy life and pursue a lot of interests and aspirations.

Subversion:

Irony and a **pro-active**, **critical** and **militant approach** can help challenge **ageism** and the **stereotypes on age**, as in the examples here below.

• **Old People are Useless**.
Darren Blackborough's "Old People are Useless. Representations of Aging on *The Simpsons*" (2010) directly quotes the episode of the Simpsons where Homer, in his notoriously 'tactful' and 'sensitive' attitude, comforts his father by saying: "Awww, Dad, you've done a lot of great things. But you're a very old man now. And old people are useless".
Embracing, exposing and voicing one of the most common stereotypes on aging (the 'uselessness' of the elderly), the **use of irony challenges it from within**, and offers the opportunity of a critical reflection on the stereotypes assigned to aged people.


Season 5, episode 11: "Homer the Vigilante" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsrjdMmD4kM

- **Raging Grannies**.

They are an **international group** of aged women who, in their website, declare they "are out in the streets promoting peace, justice, social and economic equality through song and humour". They dress like "innocent old ladies" as a disguise to reach their purposes, adjusting the words of old songs to fit their actions in denouncing inequalities and racism. By externally **adhering** the '**old woman' stereotype**, all lace and cup-of-tea, they **challenge and subvert it** from the inside, thus promoting the **empowerment** of elderly women. "Grannying", they say, "is the least understood yet most powerful weapon we have". They walk in the **cross-cultural ancient footpaths** of the "the strong, wise, older women (...) who advised, mediated and fought for what was right". Through their **public actions** they also show that political activism and demonstrations are not the prerogative of a young age.

- **Feminist perspective on aging**

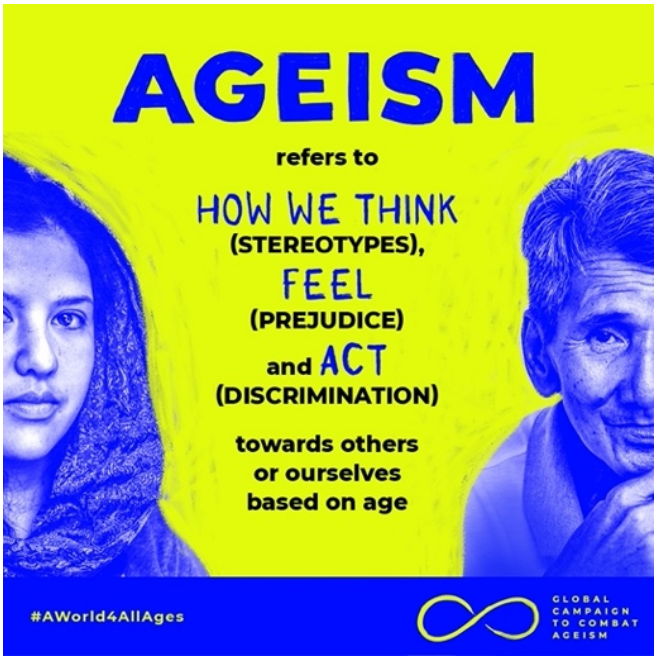
"*Suis-je donc devenue une autre alors que je demeure moi-même*?"

[Have I become another while remaining myself?]

(Simone de Beauvoir)

In her 1970 pivotal essay *Vieillesse* [Old Age], feminist writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir sustains that in the old age **we become others to ourselves**. Both a biological and a cultural process, the old age opens a divide between the **interior image** and the **exterior image** of ourselves. De Beauvoir recognizes that aging is not the same for **men** and **women**, with the latter suffering more prejudices and discrimination, particularly for which regards female sexuality in the old age, which she bitterly remarks that is considered an actual taboo. Since 1970s **several feminists** (e.g., Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer) have proudly taken up the baton of the discussion, refusing to consider female old age as a shameful or forbidden topic. The feminist approach to the old age **refuses categorizations**, sustaining that we cannot speak of 'old age' in general since there are many different '**old ages**', and that diversities - which often come as inequalities - are caused by several major factors. Relying on the classic feminist theory, which recognizes **class**, **gender**, and **race** as major factors of discrimination and inequality, the feminist perspective on age sustains that **age itself** should be considered another relevant element in the intersectional analysis of these categories, since it constitutes another source of social inequality (Calasanti & Slavin, 2006).

- **An initiative by the WHO (World Health Organization)**



On March 25th, 2021, the WHO launched a **global report on ageism** to provide **outlines for action** to challenge and reduce ageism. The report also includes specific recommendations for different actors (e.g., government, UN agencies, civil society organizations, private sector). As the image suggests, the campaign against **ageism** is here conceived in its widest sense, including **discrimination against young people**.

Discussion:

- Have you ever **felt** - or been - **discriminated** because of **your age**?
- How are elderly people considered/treated in **your country**? Are they marginalized or cared for, are they visible or invisible, etc.?
- Which **words** are used to define them? For example, when not uttered in a familial-friendly context and with an affective intention, in Italian the term '***vecchio/a***' (old) has become a sort of a taboo word and, when maliciously expressed, an actual insult. In Italy, the word used to define a person of age is '**anziano/a**' (elderly, senior).

- What is your representation of aging and of the old age? Which images, characteristics, values, advantages, disadvantages, do you associate with the old age?
- From a social and cultural point of view, do you think that **aging is the same** for men and women?

References/Further Readings:

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- Calasanti, T. M., Slevin, K.F. (eds.) (2006). *Age Matters: Realigning Feminist Thinking*. New York, NY: Routledge.
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- Minkler, M., Estes, C. (eds.) (1991/2020). *Critical Perspectives on Aging. The Political and Moral Economy of Growing Old*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Links:

- *Osservatorio Senior* [Senior Observatory]: https://osservatoriosenior.it/limmagine-dei-senior-tra-prodotti-e-pubblicita/.
- Raging Grannies: https://raginggrannies.org/
- Travel websites: https://www.guidaviaggio.com/itinerari/vacanze-per-anziani-le-mete-piu-adatte; https://vacanzaterzaeta.it/
- WHO Global report on Ageism: https://jp-demographic.eu/whos-global-report-on-ageism/)

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