Neoliberalism and Postmodern Culture of Aging

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Charles Longino and I co-authored three articles, beginning with a proposal to make consumer-directed care the centerpiece of LTC policy over the next decade (Longino & Polivka, 2001). This article grew out of a review I wrote of a book Chuck co-authored on postmodern aging with a colleague in philosophy (Longino & Murphy, 1994). This book made the postmodern case for a decategorization of aging, for not locking life into predetermined stages of age-appropriate thinking, behaving or “being,” of keeping life open-ended, even under conditions of impairment (Polivka, 1996). I agreed with Chuck and John that this postmodern perspective on aging had positive implications for the aging experience. I also noted, however, that there was a conservative, or what we later called a neoliberal strand of postmodern theory and practice with less positive implications for the elderly, especially those with low or modest incomes and assets.

In our last article (Polivka & Longino, 2006) we described the differences between these strands of postmodernism and

the implications of the ideological differences between what we call the neoliberal and progressive postmodern perspectives on the aging experience in the years ahead. These differences are especially salient for the social and economic well-being of future retirees, most of whom will be as dependent on publicly supported income and healthcare benefits as current retirees. Our argument is that the dismantling of programs providing the benefits would undermine any opportunity for most retirees to experience the kind of freedom, creativity and self-development that are potentially a part of the postmodern aging experience. Postmodern cultural trends create greater space for individual agency and public welfare programs, including income support and healthcare programs for retirees, and should be designed to nurture individual choice and control. This does not require, however, the dismantlement of programs, which would leave most retirees without the resources required to exercise choice and control in any effective manner. Neoliberal proposals to dismantle the welfare state would resurrect the hazards of old age characteristic of the pre-modern past, including poverty, poor healthcare and powerlessness. (p. 184)

The Generations (2001) article was about how a progressive postmodernism could shape public policy in a manner designed to improve the quality of life of impaired older persons with long-term care needs by giving them greater control over long-term care resources and giving them greater latitude to exercise choice and maximize their capacity to live autonomously even though disabled—to live according to self-created scripts. Our proposal was designed to recognize the desire of many impaired persons to maintain their autonomy and sense of control (freedom) by giving them the authority to manage their own long-term care services with whatever administrative assistance might be needed. Our proposal to shift control of long-term care resources from agency staff to the individuals using them was based on the position that these resources should be expanded rather than reduced or eliminated per the neoliberal postmodern critique of the welfare state. Our support for consumer-directed long-term care reflected a commitment to the values of individual freedom, moral autonomy, self-efficacy and agency and to the collective provision of the resources necessary to make these values achievable.
These values (individual freedom, moral autonomy, self-creation, sense of agency) and ways of life have evolved in the west for over 500 years from the Renaissance, Enlightenment, Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Romantic movement of the 19th century; the British, American, and French revolutions; the end of feudalism and emergence of industrial capitalism, nation-states and forms of representative democracy and other manifestations of modernity; up to the multiple "rights" movement of the 1960s, a cohort experience for many members of the baby boom generation. A cohort experience based on the fundamental values of modernity (freedom, equality, progress) that were radicalized in postmodern theory, social analysis and literary criticism and expressed in the concepts of anti-foundationalism, the supremacy of the text, the interpretative or linguistic turn in philosophy and literary analysis, resistance to oppressive meta narratives of how the world works, contingency, revisable and contestable knowledge and the open-ended nature of meaning, etc. that were developed by Derrida, Foucault, DeMan, Rorty et al. in the last decades of the 20th century.

**Neoliberal postmodernism and the aging experience**

The Gilseard and Higgs book *Cultures of Aging* (2000) was a major influence on our thinking about post-modernism and postmodern theory and their implications for the aging experience, ethics, and public policy. The book alerted us to the potential threats of a neoliberal postmodern society and theory to the moral status of the elderly, especially dependent persons and the policy infrastructure that had emerged since the New Deal to support retirement security (Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, tax-supported private pensions, and health care).

*Cultures of Aging* (2000) is preoccupied with an affluent “third age” of life and a kind of “celebrationist” postmodernism that reduces social, political, and public life generally to participation in the market and the citizen to just another consumer whose rights are determined by their power in the market—by their wealth or lack of it. This is a kind of postmodernism that is consistent with neoliberal economics and its agenda for privatization of public sector programs and for moving control of tax-funded programs from the public to the private sector where they can be used to generate profits in the name of increased choice and efficiency.

Neoliberal postmodernism is fundamentally opposed to public policies we think are necessary if the opportunities (freedom, creativity) of postmodern aging are to be extended to more than just an affluent elite. According to neoliberal postmodernists, the full potential of postmodern aging cannot be achieved without the dismantling of the age-based entitlements of the welfare state, which, in their view, has trapped retirees in a labyrinth of stigmatizing structural dependency, and is inconsistent with their increasing affluence and capacity to construct their own identities through patterns of creative consumption.

The fundamentally antistatist, promarket "eclipse of the social" tendencies of this perspective are clearly evident in the following passages from Gilseard and Higgs' exegesis of the aging experience under conditions of what they refer to as "advanced liberalism."

Too much government is seen as constraining the space where individual liberty can be expressed while interpretations of this political shift may vary, the outcome is everywhere evident in the growing emphasis upon reducing public expenditure,
privileging the role of "market forces," criticizing state paternalism, resisting the collectivization of social identity and expressing skepticism toward all "grand narratives," and their attempts to claim the ideological high ground." (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000, p. 63)

Neoliberal postmodernism overlaps with movement conservation and the triumphalism of the market disembodied from society and is expressly designed to divide the elderly into those who can fully provide for themselves and those who cannot and to dramatically reduce public support for the latter. This strategic vision is fully compatible with the virulently anti-government posture of movement conservatism and its Ayn Randian devotion to the “market” in its most unfettered and disembodied from any institutional restraints form.

According to Gilleard and Higgs (2000):

The relative affluence of occupational and private pension holders separates them out from those older people as primarily welfare benefit recipients. It is the latter group who now constitute the "problem" of "old age." The same dichotomy is played out in relation to health care. Here people are presented with two images: one the physically frail and dependent "fourth-ager" lacking the necessary "self-care" skills to sustain a third-age identity, the other the active and healthy individual producing and consuming his or her "third age." (pp. 103-104)

In this scenario for the future of aging:

... third-age identities are likely to be elaborated through increasing material consumption, a sense of "packing life in" to a period of adulthood of uncertain length and a wary and ambivalent position in relation to providing for "old age." Third-agers, while acknowledging old age, are likely to prefer to live at a considerable physical and psychological distance from it. (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000, p. 45)

Gilleard and Higgs (2000) claim that the growing affluence and disenchantment with the state are dissolving the link between the citizen and the state and diminishing the need for and desirability of state welfare systems to meet the needs/demands of older persons. Gilleard and Higgs warn that:

If government policies continue to treat "the elderly" simply as another category of need, alongside the disabled, the mentally ill and other "marginalized communities," few retired people are likely to find such a "politics of age" either of personal interest or of collective concern. Instead they may turn away from the idea of citizenship altogether, preferring their own constructed self-identities. (p. 123)

This neoliberal vision of the postmodern aging experience reduces the sources of value and meaning to the workings of the market and the acquisition of consumer goods, which undermines the necessary conditions for any morally and politically effective sense of social solidarity.

Chuck and I felt that Gilleard and Higgs (2000) were largely accurate in their analysis of what neoliberal postmodernism intends for the future of the welfare state and the status of the many elderly and members of other groups who cannot pretend to be completely self-sufficient. In
fact, most retirees depend on Social Security for half or more of their income and could not afford private insurance in the absence of Medicare. Precise predictions are impossible, but these realities are not likely to be any different for most members of the next generation of retirees who will carry more debt and fewer defined benefits pensions into retirement than their parents.

In our last article, Chuck and I included several pages documenting the dependency of current and future retirees on the publicly funded system of retirement security (Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid). The current recession and collapse of the housing and financial markets, which were largely caused by the collapse of the neoliberal economic model, substantially increases the risk that the retirement security of the baby boomers will not match their parents’ experiences in retirement. In fact, the latest National Retirement Risk Index report (Munnell, Webb & Golub-Sass, 2009) indicates that a majority (60%+) of younger baby boomers will not achieve an adequate standard of living in retirement (70 to 80% of their last wage).

**Progressive postmodernism and retirement security (a new policy synthesis)**

Our progressive alternative to neoliberal postmodern aging was formulated as a new synthesis of freedom and security based on re-embedding the economy (the market) in a network of regulatory institutions (public: the regulatory welfare state; and private: family and community), while allowing the individual self to remain disembodied from its traditional social locations—to support the modern/postmodern sources of the self (moral autonomy and individual freedom) within a revitalized capitalist welfare state designed to sustain equitable growth (fairly shared productivity gains), without wrecking the environment, and to ensure an adequate (rising) level of economic security.

This kind of progressive postmodern vision for a new synthesis of public policies supporting retirement security is consistent with Gibbins’ theoretical framework for a postmodern welfare state that empowers citizens through:

... the encouragement of autonomy, self-actualisation and expressivism at the individual level; the development of new politics, and new political structures and organizations, such as new social movements, at the group level; the recognition, legitimation, and support of new types of family, network and lifestyle; the search to craft particular packages of services for particular cases; the prioritizing of particularism (not selectivism) over universalism ... the pluralizing of services; the recognition that a new set of welfare values and principles that is needed to deal with a more cosmopolitan and differentiated society (Gibbins, 1998, p. 44)

We felt that these empowerment-oriented values should guide the development of postmodern public policies designed to support a new syntheses of security and freedom for older people; expansive policies that are flexible enough to be responsive to individual needs and desires. This synthesis would emphasize individual choice, agency and autonomy, but would wed these values to a strong awareness of the needs of the vulnerable and of society's responsibility for seeing that their basic needs are met (security).
In terms of economic security, this approach makes the case for a broader, more expansive Social Security system that provides more equal benefits, especially for minorities and women; and that responds to the increasing level of risk experienced by employees in rapidly changing economies across the developed world, including declining private pensions and the growth of pensions based on defined contributions (401(k) and IRA plan). Flexibility within the occupational system should not come at the price of exclusion from provisions for financial security in old age.

The new synthesis would also require major enhancements in health- and long-term care policies in order to expand opportunities for freedom in old age. Out-of-pocket medical expenses under Medicare have grown dramatically over the last 15 years (and have put routine medical care beyond the reach of many less affluent older people, especially single women. Many older people will not have adequate access to healthcare until Medicare copayments and deductibles are substantially reduced and long-term care is made an affordable Medicare benefit.

A new synthesis long-term care policy would make long-term care universally available under Medicare and far more flexible than the current Medicaid program. A long-term care policy designed to support the autonomy of impaired elderly persons would give them much greater control over the provision of care by allowing them to decide how resources are used.

This synthesis includes the freedom of a postmodern culture that offers new sources of personal meaning as well as more opportunities for multiple, diverse, and creative narratives of the self. Public policies should be redesigned to provide more support for this kind of postmodern aging through greater flexibility and responsiveness to individual needs and desires. This approach, however, is antithetical to neoliberal policies of cutting and privatizing welfare programs and reducing choice to what individuals can afford to consume through the private market.

**The end of neoliberalism?**

Since Chuck and I published our last article on postmodern aging and the new synthesis policy framework in 2005, the neoliberal economic model has begun to unravel, first in Latin America several years ago, and now in the developed countries, including the United States. I think Chuck would agree with me that neoliberal postmodernism and “cultures of aging” theory that helped legitimize neoliberal economic policies, including the dismantling of the public and private system of retirement security, may now lose much of its political, intellectual, and cultural appeal. The neoliberal cultures of aging perspective on the aging experience never applied to more than a small minority of affluent third agers—a minority that is now rapidly shrinking as current and future retirees become more concerned with dignified survival rather than the adventures of consumption-driven self-creation and renewal.

The collapse of the neoliberal model of the political economy and the 30-year erosion of the U.S. system of retirement security have created a public policy and ideological vacuum that represents an opportunity for progressive economic and social policies that have not received serious attention since Ronald Reagan was elected. However, efforts to implement progressive economic and retirement security policies based on a more expansive, Keynesian role for the public sector, comparable to the post WWII period of managed capitalism, will encounter
vigorously resist, especially from supporters of neoliberalism among conservative policy makers, the media, and the corporate elite. Many of these supporters think that the main problem with “actually existing” neoliberalism is that it did not go far enough over the last 30 years in reducing taxes, cutting public services and privatizing those that remain and in deregulating the economy, including incredibly enough, the financial sector. Any policy proposal not fully consistent with this extremely right-wing ideology is immediately and loudly vilified as socialist. This charge has no basis in fact but can be effective in intimidating potential supporters of mildly progressive policy initiatives like health reform.

Despite the fact that neoliberal tax and military spending policies since Reagan, with a brief timeout under Clinton, have left the nation facing deep deficits, the neoliberal ideological framework continues to be very influential however evident its failures may be. The Republican Party may have moved even further to the right since Obama’s election and it now seems more opposed than ever to any expansion of the role of the public sector in the economy, whether it involves an economic stimulus package, deregulation of the financial sector or tax increases to help contain the federal deficit. The party seems to have fallen increasingly under the sway of movement conservatives for whom moderate Republicans like Dwight Eisenhower, Robert Taft, Whitaker Chambers, even Richard Nixon and George H.W. Bush are even more anathema than liberal Democrats (Tannenhaus, 2009).

Movement conservatives have become extreme in their insistence on the kind of minimalist state that Ayn Rand, even more than Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek dreamed of; a state that would only field a military, a domestic police force, and enforce contracts (Burns, 2009). This extremely limited public policy agenda leaves little for the state to do in terms of fostering equitable economic growth or providing for the health and well-being of its citizens, including ensuring retirement security. This policy agenda represents an extreme version of neoliberalism and, as such, provides no plausible solution to the current economic crisis, which is in large measure a result of the more moderate neoliberal policies (tax cuts and deregulation) enacted under Reagan and George W. Bush. Nevertheless, this is the agenda of a Republican Party under the control of movement conservatives and, given the virtually complete unity of the party behind it, especially in the House of Representatives, progressives can expect no Republican defections. This will enhance the influence of moderate and conservative Democrats in the House and Senate and increase the odds that progressive initiatives on the economy will be diluted to the point of being ineffective.

More subtle resistance can be expected from much of the media which has operated within a neoliberal ideological framework for several years. This resistance is likely to take the form of continuing to assume that the public section is inherently ineffectual and wasteful. (Reagan’s notion that the government is always part of the problem) and obsessing over budget deficits that might be caused by spending to stimulate the economy and help those most afflicted by the recession. This neoliberal framing of economic policy and of “realistic” policy options to address the recession both shapes and reflects public attitudes regarding the role of government in the economy. The dominance of the neoliberal model of the political economy over the last 30 years has erased much of the collective memory of how well the federal government helped manage the economy from the New Deal to the mid-1970’s, by implementing policies that generated sustained and equitable (declining inequality) growth for over 30 years.
From Reagan's claim that government is always part of the problem to Clinton's declaration that the era of big government is over and Bush IIs efforts to create an ownership society through relentless privatization, the public has absorbed a constant message denouncing the public sector and celebrating the glories of the unregulated market. Ayn Rand died in 1982, but her hatred of government seemed to become the dominant ideological meme of the entire period since her death. This anti-government attitude has a strong hold on the public mind and is probably the greatest barrier to using the resources of the public sector to stimulate sustainable, equitable economic growth and to restore retirement security by improving and expanding publicly funded retirement security programs. This collective mindset reinforces the movement conservatives hold on the Republican Party, shields the power of the corporate elite to prevent fundamental changes in an economy that has become far too dependent on financial bubbles and the growth of debt and undermines the demand for greater accountability and more balanced critical reporting in the media. These ideological and political conditions may conspire to stop most of the progressive initiatives of the Obama Administration and the Congressional leadership well short of achieving such goals as solid and equitable economic growth, regulatory reform, controls on global warming and restoration of retirement security.

In short, neoliberalism may be an economic failure but it lives on as an ideological, political, and cultural force that may yet give it new opportunities to shape the political economy of the U.S., which would renew its threat to the future of retirement security and revive the neoliberal postmodern recipe for the aging experience. Chuck would expect us to remain vigilant and prepared to resist the reemergence of neoliberal threats to one of the great achievements of working people in the last century—economic security in old age.

Conclusion

I'm confident that Chuck would be as interested as I am in maintaining and developing further the vision of a new synthesis of freedom and security for older people—of not letting the potential revival of neoliberalism destroy the prospects for a progressive postmodern aging. Salvaging the progressive postmodern vision of the aging experience (freedom and security) from the ashes of neoliberalism will, I believe require the construction of a social democratic economy and public policy agenda (a new New Deal) based on the theory (and historical experience) that public investments in our physical, educational, and health care infrastructures are necessary to achieve equitable, sustainable growth and a high quality of life for the vast majority of our citizens. Any expansive public investment strategy for economic renewal would include a comprehensive family support program, a high priority on gender and ethnic equality, and provisions for old age security that are not dependent on the vicissitudes of the market.

A family support program designed to prevent poverty and featuring extensive investments in early childhood cognitive development can qualitatively reduce levels of educational failure and increase employability and overall productivity for decades after the initial investments. Gender equality has several dimensions; but from a growth and development perspective, programs that help to harmonize child rearing with employment can prevent child poverty and reduce the severe labor force and birth shortages confronting many developed countries over the next several decades. These growth-oriented social investments can better position countries to meet the increasing costs of ensuring retirement security and enhance the labor force participation of
women through publicly supported caregiving programs for the growing population of frail elderly persons in all developed countries.

References


