Chapter 1

POSTMODERN AGING AND THE
FUTURE OF PUBLIC POLICY

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ABSTRACT

The paper is organized into two sections. It begins with an overview of some of the cultural and social changes and trends associated with the emergence of post-traditional, postmodern society. Those changes will be examined which, we think, have the greatest salience for the future of aging. The second section describes some of the major implications of these changes for public policies related to the elderly. This section also describes the public policy response we think is most compatible with the kinds of lives older persons are likely to experience in the future with an emphasis on the lives of the frail elderly. Most discussions about greater agency and creativity among the future elderly of the baby boom generation, treat physical and mental decline as definitive limits on agency. In our view, it is within these limits and those imposed by the lack of economic resources that public policies should operate to support those who require assistance in order to maintain their freedom and agency.

INTRODUCTION

The debate over the future of aging in the 21st century and its role of public policy began nearly two decades ago and is likely to become increasingly contentious and central to domestic politics in all Western societies over the next 20 years. A recent New York Times article by Robin Toner (2002) described how this perception has become widespread in Congress as both parties work to gain advantage, or protection in current and future conflicts over Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

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A demographic phenomenon resides at the base of this policy debate: the aging of the populations of industrialized nations, including the United States. Population aging is such a common phenomenon that demographers do not see it as remarkable. In agricultural economies with high birth and death rates, the population is stable. It is destabilized when death rates begin to fall, owing largely to public health measures easily transported from developed nations by non-government organizations. As death rates drop, birth rates fall also, but at a later time. Large families bless the agricultural labor force, but are harder to absorb in an industrializing economy. Birth rates eventually fall to the same lower level as death rates. During the time when birth and death rates are unbalanced, however, the population grows rapidly and becomes younger as the median age falls, indicating the heightened survival rate for babies and children. The explosion of surviving babies moves inevitably up through the ages until they are old, and die out, leaving behind a population that is stable once again, with low birth and death rates.

Western countries, including the United States, moved through this series of transitions during the first half of the 20th century. The U.S. population had reached an all-time low birth rate at the time of World War II. Then, in 1946, its birth rate rose for a decade, then it declined to its 1945 low in 1964. This eighteen-year period, 1946 to 1964, is often referenced as “the baby boom” in popular literature today. For demographers, however, this reversal is notable because it represents an aberration, a regression to the earlier imbalance between birth and death rates more characteristic of the middle phase of the worldwide population transition. Population aging is a pervasive worldwide natural phenomenon. It is, at least in part, a societal adjustment to the increasing use of birth- and death-related technologies that grow out of the modern era. The policy issues generated or enhanced by population aging, will be debated in every society, not in ours alone.

Characteristic of the era, perhaps, there is no consensus, even on basic terms, to describe our location in societal change. In this paper we attempt to situate these conflicts in the context of broad demographic, social, political, and cultural changes that have swept across Western societies over the past thirty or forty years, after our “baby boom” came of age. Yet we are faced with a choice of competing rubrics: post-traditional society or postmodernism. These two terms are not fully interchangeable in that post-traditional social theorists reject the notion that there is a qualitative difference between modernism and the major tenets of postmodern thought. For them, contemporary societies still operate under the influence of modernism, with its roots in the enlightenment and the birth of science and secularism, only more so during a period that may be called hyper-modernism. For our purposes, these differences are not as significant as the changes and trends in Western society theorized by both perspectives, and that allows us to draw on work by theorists in both camps as we develop our analysis of population aging and public policy.

The paper is organized into two sections. It begins with an overview of some of the cultural and social changes and trends associated with the emergence of post-traditional, postmodern society. Those changes will be examined which, we think, have the greatest salience for the future of aging. The second section describes some of the major implications of these changes for public policies related to the elderly. This section also describes the kind of public policy response we recommend as most compatible with the kinds of lives elder persons are likely to experience in the future with an emphasis on the lives of the frail elderly. This emphasis is necessary because the frail elderly have the most at stake in any discussion/debate about changes in public policies related to the elderly, especially health and
long-term care policies. We also think it is important to focus on the frail elderly in the context of cultural changes that have tended to valorize individual freedom and agency. We think these changes are at least as significant for the less than fully independent elderly as for the robustly youthful third-ager. Most discussions, however, about greater agency and creativity among the future elderly of the baby boom generation, treat physical and mental decline as definitive limits on agency. In our view, it is within these limits and those imposed by the lack of economic resources that public policies should operate to support those who require assistance in order to maintain their freedom and agency. We do not, in short, see frailty and impairment as the antithesis of agency. It is precisely when the individual begins to experience the erosion of freedom and agency that often comes with impairment and frailty that public policies should be designed to provide the resources needed to resist the loss of agency and allow the individual to exercise as much autonomy as possible under conditions of impairment.

These policies differ from the neoliberal privatization policies that are often associated with a strand of postmodern thought that celebrates the role of the market and self-expression through consumption. We refer to our recommended approach to new policies for the elderly as the “new synthesis” because it gives equal weight to ensuring the economic security of the elderly and creating more flexible self-empowerment-oriented policies that reflect the freedom and individual autonomy created by the emergence of post-traditional, postmodern societies.

THE POSTMODERN WORLD AND THE NEW INDIVIDUALISM

The postmodern world, or late modernity, is increasingly shaped by conscious, intentional change that tends to radicalize life by evacuating, disinterring and problematizing tradition. This level of change exposes society and the individual to growing contingency and risk. These trends also produce more opportunities for freedom and creativity for individuals and society. The influence of traditions, and the institutions that embody them, has faded over the last several decades. Accordingly, social organizations and individuals have had to write their own scripts and make decisions about a wide range of issues that were once largely made for them by adherence to strong traditional values and ways of life.

According to Anthony Giddens (1994) tradition is based on a formulaic notion of truth and is managed by priests and guardians through rituals. Formulaic truth uses ritual language that is performative; that is, it does not have referential properties nor does it rely on reasons for justification. Traditions, and guardians of tradition, depend on received wisdom and the ability to interpret symbols and make them meaningful. Expert knowledge, on the other hand, cannot generate meaning, and this has created a “problem of meaning” in our post-traditional world.

Giddens has described some of the major differences between tradition and its formulaic truths and expert knowledge as follows:

First, expertise is disembedding; in contrast to tradition it is in a fundamental sense non-local and decentered. Second, expertise is tied not to formulaic truth but to a belief in the corrigibility of knowledge, a belief that depends upon a methodical skepticism. Third, the accumulation of expert knowledge involves intrinsic processes of specialization. Fourth, trust in abstract systems, or in experts, cannot readily be generated by means of esoteric wisdom.
Fifth, expertise interacts with growing institutional reflexivity, such that there are regular processes of loss and reappropriation of everyday skills and knowledge. (Giddens 1994:71)

In modernity, as traditions weaken and fade, we have the task of overcoming the programming built into our early lives (deprogramming our consciousness) as we become more autonomous and responsible for building our own identities and mastering the tools of self-creation—of making our own decisions about values and behaviors. This self-creation does not mean that we make decisions and live our lives independent of others. We often look to others for guidance and support, but they are just as much on their own as we are and the collective expression of values is more likely to take the form of ephemeral fads and fashions than traditions. In place of tradition and the routines of life embedded in them, we have self-reflexivity, i.e., making decisions on our own and in terms of self-generated criteria and rationales. Self-reflexivity, unfortunately, can also create the kind of stress that leads to addiction and other ways of escaping the anxieties of freedom and the loss of transcendent sources of meaning once provided by strong traditions, especially religious traditions. The emergence of the autonomous, self-reflexive individual is the motor of social change in the modern and postmodern era. Scott Lash (1994) has noted that:

... simple modernity is modern in the sense that individualization has largely broken down the old traditional structures—extended family, church, village community—of the Gemeinschaft. Yet it is not fully modern because the individualization process has only gone part way and a new set of gesellschaftisch structures—trade unions, welfare state, government bureaucracy, formalized Taylorist shopfloor rules, class itself as a structure—has taken the place of traditional structures. Full modernization takes place only when further individualization also sets agency free from even these (simply) modern social structures. (Lash 1994:46)

The evacuating of traditions tends to make the past emotionally inert. The past can be reconstructed, however, in terms of present needs and desires, as individuals become emotionally and intellectually autonomous, and as personal relationships are more dependent on intimacy, which is largely free of traditional roles and expectations (pure relationships). The succession of generations loses some of its significance in the post-traditional era, as compared to the past, when it was an important means of transmitting traditional symbols and practices. In this way, the processes of detraditionalization tend to diminish the relevance of the old as sources of tradition-based wisdom in postmodern society.

This tendency, however, is countered by the growing sense of many in middle age, who can no longer sustain the illusion of youth, and who have begun to experience the truths of aging: human mortality, fragility, vulnerability, the inherent peril of life, disenchantment with materialism, the realities of love, loss and suffering, the value of kindness, openness and compassion, and the salience of early life memories, especially those of parents and other older relatives and friends. A growing resistance often accompanies these perceptions to purely instrumental values geared to consumerism and materialism.

According to Chris Phillipson (1998), the postmodern society is creating a new definition of what it means to be old:

... in the conditions of advanced modernity, growing old moves from being a collective to an individual experience. The notion of an aging society (with social responsibilities) becomes
secondary to the emphasis on aging individuals—the crisis of aging seen to originate in how individuals rather than societies handle the demands associated with social aging.

(Phillipson 1998:119)

There is no final authority in post-traditional society, including science that is viewed as the foundation of truth and knowledge. Like all other domains of knowledge in late modernity, knowledge claims in science are considered corrigeable and subject to constant revision. There may be a greater degree of methodological consensus in science than other fields of inquiry; but, like the rest of postmodern or late-modern life, it has no stable theoretical grounding or set of universal criteria which can assess all knowledge claims.

The individual in post-traditional society increasingly has to decide which expert knowledge to accept, knowing that all knowledge is revisable and subject to a thorough going epistemological skepticism. Trust in knowledge is always provisional and pragmatically given or withdrawn. Many individuals, more or less consciously, appropriate expert knowledge and construct, revise and integrate it to create their own view of the world and sense of self. They use information/knowledge to create their own narratives of the world and their relationship to it—narratives, which are most consistent with their desire to achieve a sense of authenticity. This self-constructed life narrative helps the individual resist the compulsive acceptance of expert knowledge (consumerism) and to protect and valorize their autonomy. The growing importance of autonomously constructed narratives of the self creates the conditions for the proliferation and diversification of cultural perspectives, life style options belief systems, and the eclectic blending of values and behaviors. This trend toward diverse perspectives and openness has major implications for older persons and the retirement experience:

... in relation to retirement as a whole, the scope for decision-making has been drastically widened. Increasingly, people are being called upon to build retirement around their own individual planning, both in relation to finances and the timing and manner in which they leave the workplace. These questions indicate that older age has simultaneously become a major source of 'risk' but also a potential source of 'liberation'. Old age does threaten disaster—poverty, severe illness, the loss of a loved one. But it also can bring the opposite: freedom from restrictive work and domestic roles; new relationships; and a greater feeling of security. People do truly ride a 'juggernaut' in older age, and this is making the period more rather than less central as an issue of concern for social policy.

(Phillipson 1998:125)

This description of the future of retirement might be called "the postmodern dialectic of the new aging experience," which could generate a new synthesis of security (pensions and medical coverage) and freedom. This new synthesis would allow older persons to resist arbitrary closure of "life's journey." New experiences and new identities can be sought and experimented with. Gerontophobes can be challenged creatively across a broad range of social, cultural and political issues. This kind of positive freedom, however, is only available within the new synthesis if based on the security of publicly provided pensions and health care. This is especially the case in minority elderly and women. Postmodern freedom is as dependent on the preservation of Social Security and Medicare, and their enhancements, as it is on cultural openness, individual autonomy, and the other features of the post-traditional society we have discussed here. We will return to this issue, the relationship between security and freedom, in the last section of the paper.
In post-traditional society, reasons have to be given for attitudes and behaviors in the growing absence of tacit assumptions based on widespread acceptance of traditional culture and belief systems. These reasons are increasingly drawn from self-constructed life narratives that open up space for discursive personal relationships and expanded cognitive activity. Individuals bear greater responsibility for articulating their own attitudes, values and behaviors. This need to justify decisions tends to destabilize differentials in power. Power is no longer inherently legitimated by claims on tradition. Rather they are based on revisable expert knowledge and the authority it provides only provisionally. In this context, power differentials are constantly in jeopardy of being dissolved and reconstructed. Power differentials in post-traditional society are increasingly bounded and penetrated by an ethics based on equality. These ethics assume that individual autonomy makes the other as capable and responsible for agency as one’s self.

Ronald Inglehart (1997) and his colleagues have been tracking changes in values since the early 1970s in over 25 countries with the use of survey data. In the vast majority of these countries the data indicate movement from materialist to postmaterialist and postmodern values. The shift involves a movement away from values associated with the search for economic security to a growing emphasis on individual autonomy, self-expression, tolerance, human rights, ecological awareness and rejection of institutional and hierarchical authority in all domains. All of these trends are accompanied by a deepening quest for personal meaning and morality, for spiritual development, close affectionate ties with family members and friends, and existential significance in work. Among the many consequences of these changes is:

... a shift away from the overemphasis on instrumental rationality that characterized industrial society, toward a more balanced synthesis of functional rationality and a renewed concern for ultimate ends, in which the pursuit of human well-being and self-expression is a major component.
(Inglehart 1997:339)

In summarizing the overall impact of these changes in values, Ingelhart writes that:

... the publics of advanced industrial societies are moving toward postmodern values and placing increasing emphasis on the quality of life. Empirical evidence from around the world shows that cultural patterns are closely linked with the economic and political characteristics of given societies. The Modernization syndrome is linked with a shift from traditional to rational-legal values; but the emergence of advanced industrial society gives rise to a shift from survival values to postmodern values, in which a variety of changes, from equal rights for women to the emergence of democratic political institutions, become increasingly likely.
(Inglehart 1997:339)

The institutional response to the pursuit of individual autonomy and reflexivity is eroding hierarchical command and control systems throughout society. As it erodes power differentials, it creates greater opportunities for the exercise of autonomy and choice.

Furthermore, the emphasis on autonomy and reflexivity is expanding the scope of ethics in everyday life and making philosophers of us all. We must confront the life and death consequences of our increasingly complex and perplexing technological, cultural and political environments.
These trends toward a post-traditional society, characterized by revisable, contestable expert knowledge, provisional authority, and self-reflexivity, are creating the conditions for the democratization of all forms of social institutions, which must increasingly accommodate individual autonomy as the organizing principle of post-traditional, late modern society. Democratizing processes now operate at every level of society including personal relationships characterized by mutual understanding, intense communication, sensitivity and equality. This democracy of the emotions offers many rewards but also puts relationships under considerable strain. This pressure is not experienced in more traditional societies where the form and substance of relationships are more likely to be inherited than made. The relational pressure in traditional societies tends to arise, to the contrary, from oppressive power relationships.

Democratization is also occurring at the higher levels of institutional life where hierarchy and bureaucratic domination is gradually giving way to continual negotiation among all affected parties. For example, political and professional elites increasingly share decision-making space and authority with social and self-help movements and non-government organizations (NGOs) in the development and response to a widening range of social, political, economic and cultural issues. These movements and groups have their own experts whose knowledge and judgment is frequently contested by their own colleagues who are committed to keeping their organizations as reflexive as possible in response to constantly changing organizational environments. This state of continuous reflexivity and adjustment frustrates the desire for central control and certainty. Members and sympathizers of these loosely structured organizations and groups are agents operating in flexible networks, disembedded from traditions and inflexible, highly structured organizations. Even conventional mainstream political and economic organizations are loosening up. They are becoming more dispersed and flexible as institutional life in general is becoming more fluid and the dualistic models of modernity (autonomy/control, basic/superstructure, culture/economic relations, agency/structure) dissolve with the fading of traditions and their inherited formulaic truths and priests or guardians.

We live, increasingly, in a world shaped by agents, (individuals and groups) of accelerating epistemic change in the cognitive and cultural frames of life. We are moving from the positivistic certainties and technocratic instrumentalism of early modernity toward reflexivity, experimentation, expanding cognitive capacity, cultural openness and complexity, and, of course, individual autonomy. These discursive agents operate in a culture of critical discourse. Further, they create communication societies with competing counter-elites and high levels of contingency. Multiple cultural perspectives are generated by the processes of globalization and detraditionalization. The result is a diffusion of power, and the potential for radical openness. In communication societies, social knowledge and public policy are constructed and deconstructed through a wide range of intersecting and competing networks. These shifting networks are made from relationships that are highly contingent and subject to collapse. This contingency undermines the ability of elites and collective agents to define and control social, political and cultural situations and the policy agenda. This new, emerging reality makes access to the communication apparatus a critical area of conflict. This area will become even more urgently contested in the years ahead as alternative methods, including variants of the internet, are developed just beyond the capacities of corporate organization and governments to control fully.
There is no guarantee that the trends and changes described here under the broad conceptual framework of post-traditional, or postmodern society, will eventually culminate in institutions and cultures that are fundamentally characterized by institutional and individual reflexivity, discursivity, flexibility and openness. Nor is it a certainty that fluctuating networks of power and leveled hierarchies, or that revisable and contested expert knowledge, and a politics and ethics based on unqualified equality and individual autonomy rather than inherited categories and criteria, will prevail. These extensive trends are arrayed against powerful forces, including atavistic nationalism's, religious and ethnic fundamentalism of many kinds, and the drive of transnational corporations to control the global political economy. The probable outcome of this clash of forces over the next several decades will be some unpredictable amalgam, which will not reflect a clear victory for any one side in this complex, multidimensional conflict. It is extremely doubtful, however, that forces associated with the emerging post-traditional society will be vanquished. Currently opposing forces, especially transnational corporations, dependent on information technology, communications, and scientific research are led and staffed by many people who have been deeply influenced by post-traditional values, including self-reflexivity, autonomy, intellectual and cultural openness, methodological skepticism, and an ethics based on equality and self-determination.

TOWARD A POSTMODERN PUBLIC POLICY FOR THE ELDERLY

This brief overview of some of the major tenets of postmodern social theory, or theories of post-traditional societies, is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather, our intention is to use these theoretical tools to identify a few of the more salient trends and changes in Western societies as a prelude to discussing their implications for social policy generally, and policies for the frail elderly in particular. In this section, we will attempt to show that current policies are largely not consistent with our emerging post-traditional society and that this gap will become increasingly evident and difficult to justify as the huge baby-boom generation ages over the next 30 years. This generation is the first to feel the full weight of the change and trends we described in the first section and this influence is likely to effect their expectations of social policy in the future.

The trends and changes caused by the emergence of post-traditional society, and its associated values and behaviors, represent a growing challenge to current social policy. Any effective response to this challenge will require the creation of new conceptual and explanatory frameworks in the development and execution of policies and programs. Frameworks that reflect post-traditional values (autonomy, reflexivity, self-determination, equality) will gain support. Further, perspectives on identity and interpersonal and institutional relationships will take on a postmodern hue in that the need to level power differentials within institutional and organizational contexts will require the dismantling of pejorative binaries embedded in contemporary social policy. These binaries include man/woman, native/foreigner, case manager/client, able/disabled and others that implicitly incorporate assumptions about who has power and who does not. The work of Michael Foucault (1980) on the relationship between knowledge and power is particularly helpful in analyzing the oppressive functions of binary structures, the power relationships they support and the veiled ways in which they are used to exclude groups from the policy development process. Foucault examined how knowledge is used to generate and apply power by the elites,
in part by defining what is normal thought and behavior and what is not, and by the use of knowledge/information to create systems of surveillance and disciplinary control. This perspective is easily transferred to social policy discourse. John Gibbens (1998), for example, has noted that:

Social policy has constructed its own truths and legitimations for its own normalization processes. Deconstruction of the dominant binaries constructed and deployed over recent decades can make way for the invention of alternative, non-binary schemes. Poststructuralism suggests that, in social policy discourse and practice, we should encourage and be prepared to accept more the self-made categories and subjective classification of individuals and groups, such as the practice of ‘sexing the self’ as a response to the deconstruction and collapse of gender and sex binaries.

Gibbens (1998:42)

The postmodernist critique of social policy and its underlying binary structure is based on a rejection of many of the fundamental categories of Western thought that have dominated thinking about politics and public policy from the enlightenment to the modernisms of the 20th century. More specifically, this critique is based on a rejection of the notion that language directly represents some foundational reality (language is an active agent in the creation of reality/ies), and that knowledge is innocent of power (discourse reflects and often causes oppression), and that any single world view, ideology or knowledge system (metanarrative) is superior (universally valued) to any other that there is an essential human nature.

If postmodernists reject metanarratives and replace them with multiple narrative disciplines and reject methodological foundationalism and essentialism, so they also reject the ideas of an essential human nature or self, structured lifestyles based on social categorization, and the ideas that values are merely ideological epiphenomena of these primary structure. Rather postmodernists assert that the subject should be seen as essentially decentered or without fixed content; that s/he has few if any fixed, universal or essential characteristics. The self is a multiple personality, with plural, distinct and often conflicting facets and needs, finding expression in ever-changing and highly personalized, eclectic lifestyles, now more usually held together by particular patterns of personalized preferences and values than by the imposition of the dull routine of everyday life or of social-structural and functional necessities. Giddens, Connolly, Taylor and we ourselves have hypothesized that accompanying the ‘disembedding’ of the self from its traditional social location is a process of the ‘reinvention’ of the self (Connolly 1991; Giddens 1991a; Taylor 1989). We hypothesize the emergence of new structures of feeling and new patterns of values and preferences amongst western citizens that have an impact on behavior, practices and institutions, including areas considered in social policy.


Abandoning essentialism and foundationalism, binary structures and metanarratives that support the exclusionary normalizing tendencies of conventional social theories and practices, creates space for exploring the diversity, difference and indeterminacy that are inherent in all language, discourse and behavior. In the absence of metanarratives, or grand theories about human behavior designed to generate a consensus around comprehensive controlling social policies, we can begin to recognize the realities of pluralism, fragmentation, diversity of culture and subjective realities, contingency and ambivalence of postmodern life. Gibbins (1998) has noted that:
... if social policy has to deal with new selves and groups who are more self-authored, autonomous and assertive, it will need to change its assumptions, aims and practices. How to reconcile the results of the processes of disembodiment, pluralisation and empowerment is the problem inherited by postmodern social policy, with which every police force, prison, school, hospital and community must grapple. Changing needs, desires, problems, uncertainties and risks, emerging from the new situations and relationships, also pose immediate challenges.

(Gibbens 1998:43-44)

These challenges are also present in the provision of health and long-term care services for older persons.

In responding to these challenges, a new theoretical framework and criteria are needed for the development of social policy:

The outlines of this can be found in various recent texts, which advocate for the future (rather than celebrate the arrival of) the empowerment of citizens: the encouragement of autonomy, self-actualization 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 legitimisation 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 addressing of welfare risks, issues and solution at the global, local and transnational levels; the pluralizing of services; the recognition that a new set of welfare values and principles is needed to deal with a more cosmopolitan and differentiated society; and the exploration of solutions to welfare problems at other levels than and in additional agencies to those of the central and local state.

(Gibbins 1998:44)

These are the kind of empowerment-oriented values and realities that should guide the development of postmodern public policies designed to support the new syntheses of security and freedom for older people; they are expansive policies that are flexible enough to be responsive to individual needs and desires. Health and long-term care policies and pension benefits should be universal in scope and particularistic in application.

Chris Phillipson (1998) describes this new synthesis perspective well when he writes that he is not arguing:

... for a narrow 'postmodern' view of aging which focuses simply on choice and reflexivity, ignoring the profound inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity which continue to shape the lives of older people. In fact, I wish to draw a middle position between these two: arguing, first for a framework which provides the necessary financial support for older people; but, second, for greater flexibility as regards the way in which older age is allowed to develop within society.

(Phillipson 1998:127)

In terms of economic security, Phillipson 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. This means that public pensions should be redesigned to reflect a view of productive activities, such as caregiving, that occur outside the formal marketplace, and that are responsive to the realities of contemporary work, such as
multiple entries and exits from formal employment. Flexibility within the occupational system should not come at the price of exclusion from financial provisions for old age.

The new synthesis of the dialectics of aging will 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 (from 10% to 20%+ of discretionary income) and have put routine medical care beyond the reach of many less affluent older people, especially women. Adding a prescription drug benefit to Medicare would help reduce out-of-pocket costs, but 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. Publicly provided long-term care is now only available to poor Medicaid-eligible elders, the vast majority of whom are in nursing homes. A new synthesis long-term care policy would make care universally available under Medicare (new synthesis: security) and far more flexible than the current Medicaid program. A long-term care policy designed to support the autonomy of impaired elderly persons (new synthesis: freedom) would give them much greater control over the provision of care by allowing them to decide how resources are used. The model of care most compatible with the preservation and nurturing of autonomy under conditions of impairment is consumer-directed care (CDC), which includes allowing consumers to pay their own selected caregivers.

There are multiple strands of postmodern thought, one of which represents a serious threat to the new synthesis (security and freedom) postmodern approach to public policy.

This is celebrationist, Saatchi-style postmodernism, commodified to the gills—regardless of whether the shopping is done in the mall or cyberspace. It sidesteps disparities in wealth just as a group of advertising executives might circumnavigate a homeless beggar on their lunchtime return to the office. In this way it ignores the differential ability of groups to become active consumers and bestows full human status only on those able to choose. Its designation of gender and ethnicity and the like as merely lifestyle choices misses the point that these are also social divisions and still significant sites of inequality. This then is a complacent and selfish postmodernism which, with its hyper-commodification of the cultural realm, serves to exclude the poor just as efficiently as any caste system in history.

(Carter 1998:21)

This kind of “celebrationist” postmodernism 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 neoliberalism 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 expressly designed to divide the elderly into those who can fully provide for themselves and those who cannot and to dramatically reduce possible support for the latter. According to Gillear 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 health individual producing and consuming his or her 'third age.'

(Gillett and Higgs 2000:103-104)

This is not the progressive postmodern policy agenda that inter. ds to make the capacity to choose and to act autonomously more equal by giving the less affluent greater control over the resources required to meet needs and achieve desires—to experience the freedom and creativity of a postmodern culture on a more equal basis with the affluent by diminishing the power of the market to determine “life options” in old age.

CONCLUSION

The flexible, reflexive, self-creating lives of many middle-age members of the baby boom generation will change the aging experience over the next 30 years. However, there must be a parallel effort to retain and enhance the security provisions (Social Security and Medicare) of the new synthesis for minorities and women. There must also be vigilance, lest the promise of greater freedom inherent in progressive postmodernism becomes lost in some future culture war or undermined by a diminution of social welfare provisions (security). Social Security and Medicare have greatly increased economic security among older people. These two programs have created the necessary conditions for a new synthesis of aging experiences. This synthesis includes the freedom of a postmodern culture that offers more opportunities for multiple, diverse and creative narratives of the self and personal meaning. 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, which makes personal meaning a product of individual consumption.

The struggle between progressive and neoliberal postmodernism over the future of public policy for the elderly is likely to play a major role in shaping the direction of American politics for the next several decades and the aging experience of the baby boom generation. The future of Social Security and Medicare has already been placed in great jeopardy by the emergence of huge long-term deficits in the federal budget and the possibility of large, continuing increases in military spending necessary to sustain a long, open-ended war against terrorists and tyrants. These developments could undermine the new synthesis of freedom and security in old age and create the economic, cultural and political conditions for the neoliberal dismantling of health and economic security programs for the elderly as well as others. This would leave baby boomers and later generations with their market-dependent private pensions and privately purchased health insurance. This is not a prescription for freedom, creativity and personal fulfillment in old age for most people.

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