Commentary: Aging Politics and Policy in Postmodern Society

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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 posttraditional world.

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

First, expertise is disembodied; in contrast to tradition it is in a fundamental sense nonlocal 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. (p. 71)

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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 transcedent sources of meaning once provided by strong traditions, especially religious traditions. The emergence of the autonomous, self-reflexive individual is a major source 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 gesellschaftlich 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. (p. 146)

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 uncounted by traditional roles and expectations (pure relationships). The succession of generations loses its significance in the posttraditional 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 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. These perceptions are often accompanied by a growing resistance 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 ageing society (with social responsibilities) becomes secondary to the emphasis on ageing individuals—the crisis of ageing seems to originate in how individuals rather than societies handle the demands associated with social ageing. (p. 119)

There is no final authority on posttraditional 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 corrigible 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 by which all knowledge claims can be assessed.

The individual in posttraditional society increasingly has to decide which expert knowledge to accept, knowing that all knowledge is revisable and subject to a thorough epistemological skepticism. Trust in knowledge is always provisional and pragmatically given or withdrawn. Many individuals, more or less consciously, appropriate expert knowledge and reconstruct, 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, lifestyle options, belief systems, the eclectic blendings 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, p. 123)

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 for minority group members and women. Postmodern freedom is as dependent on the presentation of Social Security and Medicare, and their
enhancements, as it is on cultural openness, individual autonomy, and the other features of the posttraditional society we have discussed here.

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 health care 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 and independence of 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 celebrationism, 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 bestow 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, p. 21)

This kind of “celebrationist” postmodernism reduces social, political, and public life generally to participation in the market, and the citizen increasingly becomes just another consumer whose rights are determined by power in the market—by 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, especially healthcare programs—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 Gilzeard and Higgs (2000):

The relative affluence of occupational and private pension holders separates them out from those older people who 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)

This is not the progressive postmodern policy agenda that intends 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.

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 be 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.

REFERENCES


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