

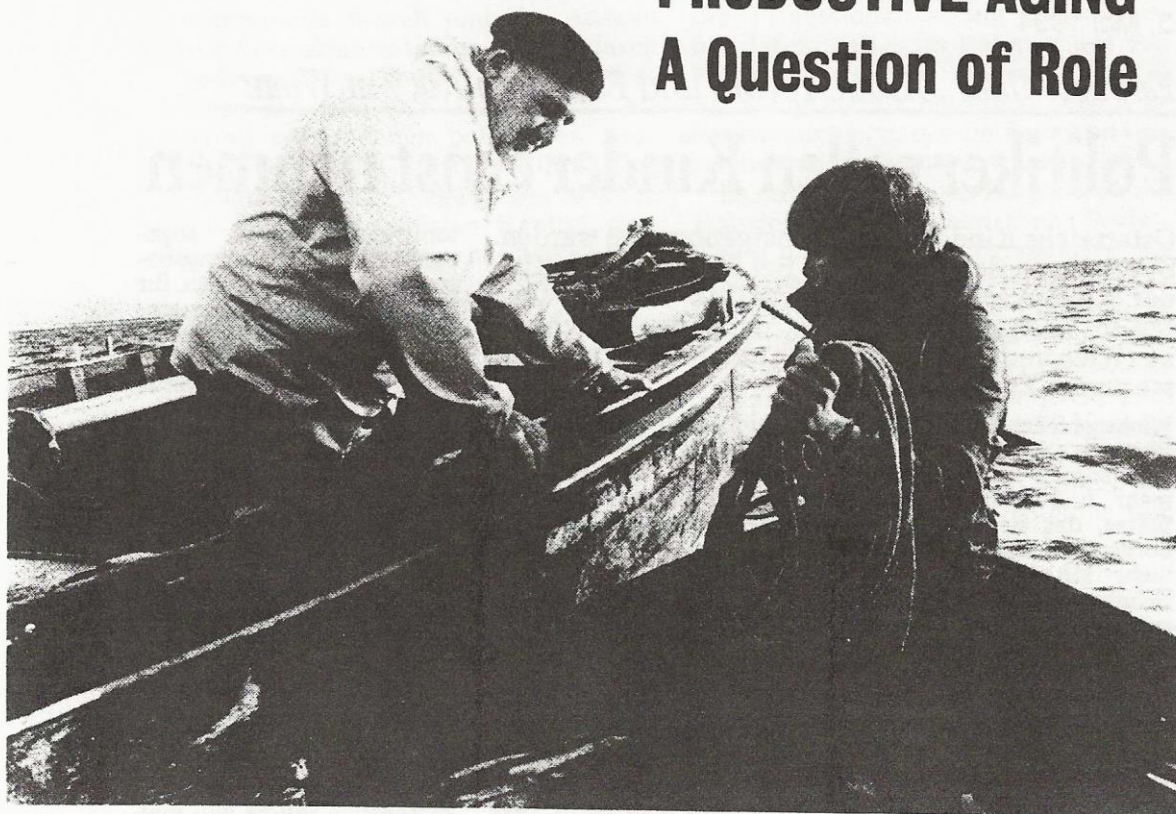


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Putting Political Participation on the Agenda

By Kai Leichsenring and Charlotte Strümpel

As a reaction to a deficit-oriented view of aging and the exclusion of older people from many realms of society, several conceptions of positive aging have been developed over the last 15 years.

The idea was to expand the way both scientists and the public approached the topic of aging so as to encompass the potential of older people. For instance, the concept of productive aging has tried to focus on the fact that old people can and should play an active part in society.^{1,2}

Concentrating on the individual's physiological and psychological capacity, theories of "successful aging" have also emphasized the importance of activity and competence.³ Although both perspectives tend to neglect old age as, for example, a time for contemplation—thus rejecting the old paradigm of "disengagement in old age"—theories of successful aging do incorporate the idea that the older a person becomes, the more she or he has to cope with losses.

The Importance of Involvement

In this article, we argue that the relevance of older persons' political participation for a productive—or any kind of positive—aging process as an instrument to integrate older people in society and to combat social exclusion is increasing.⁴ We find it important, however, that the call for old peoples' political participation doesn't lead to yet another normative concept that postulates a limited type of ideal aging. Possibilities for old people to engage in political activities should take the differences in the older population into account and provide the opportunity to choose and advocate the form of aging that suits the individual.

Therefore, our definition of political participation includes not only engagement on the collective level of representative democracy (e.g. in elections, community councils or parliaments). We also consider the extension of democratic procedures in all societal institutions and social relations as important for reducing the domination over older individuals or specific groups.⁵ As a consequence, democratic participation also touches the domain of organizing the individual's daily life, personal services and living arrangements.

Within this conceptual framework, the connections

between the concepts of positive or productive aging and political participation are manifold. In addition to these connections, there are a number of changes in society and subsequently in the aged themselves that point to a new relevance of older persons' political participation.

Despite the emphasis on active participation in society—Butler states that all individuals, including older ones, should be considered as a responsible resource for meeting their own and society's needs¹—political participation seems to be a non-issue in the discourse involving productive aging. In the many existing definitions of productive aging that differ mainly by the activities they include, political activity is not mentioned. Similarly, although many suggestions for changes in policy to enable older individuals to engage in productive activities have been made, less has been said about how—and especially by *whom*—these changes should be implemented.²

The idea of an individual's successful aging also has several implications—though not as near at hand as in the case of productive aging—for older peoples' ability to engage in political activities, for these activities' relevance to a person's well-being, and for adequate forms of political participation. The findings that old people have larger reserve capacities in several domains (e.g. cognitive functioning) than traditionally assumed raise implications as to older peoples' ability to play an active role in political processes.

Likewise, other aspects pertinent to the discussion of successful aging on an individual level can be considered on a collective basis. For example, the influence of the sense of control over their own personal situation on older persons' well-being has been discussed extensively in gerontological literature.⁶ However, the effects which political participation as an attempt at collective control has on older people remain to be studied. In the context of successful aging, participation in political activities can be seen as an area in which an older person can demonstrate competence and enhance his or her well-being.

Whereas theories of successful aging consider an individual's subjective needs and goals, the concept of productive aging advocates productivity, from a societal perspective, as a universal norm for "valuable" aging. Although the definitions of productive aging differ, they all allow only a limited number of activities as being productive. Thus, they barely acknowledge the fact that older people constitute a very heterogeneous group.

On the other hand, some of the most important findings of gerontological research concern variability in the aging process. This refers to differences among old people in life styles, their personal and social situations,

etc. The logical consequence of taking differences in groups of old people and individuals into account would be to facilitate individual forms of aging. This calls for choice, the enforcement of which can be a question of political action and power. This question is gaining importance in the wake of new political and societal trends connected with an increase in the differences between old people.

One aspect of this issue concerns the concept of retirement as a stage of financially secured non-work, which has been a major achievement of modern welfare states. The "normal" life

cycle in these welfare states, which encompasses the succession of education, work and retirement, is becoming less typical. The amount of time participating in education has expanded while the time spent engaging in paid work is decreasing. The latter is due to a higher life expectancy, the practice of early retirement and the impact of high unemployment, which increasingly affects older workers. Although some pensioners have to cope with inferior financial and social conditions, new cohorts of old people are characterized by higher education, higher income and better health than in earlier times. This results in widening gaps between and within the different groups of pensioners.

An Agenda for Participation

While more people than ever before are living a "well-deserved" and financially secure retirement—often for a



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longer period of time than their working lives—many of them pay the price of being socially marginalized and dependent on the welfare state. This fact challenges the traditional concept of retirement based on the so-called “generational treaty.” Here, the main question is if and how long modern welfare states will be able to finance social security, i.e. pensions and health care, and whether existing arrangements will still be valid for future generations. Considering that these are just some of the problems becoming increasingly relevant for contemporary and future aging, we pose the question: Who should decide on these issues and their impact on the “vital interests” of older persons, which will shape later life, if not the people concerned?

When advocating the participation of older people in political decision-making involving issues concerning them, one needs to examine the factors that influence their political behavior. In the past few years, several findings have described older citizens as politically passive.^{7,8} One of the most common explanations for this apathy is that of political disengagement and conservatism in later life. However, when looking at these empirical findings closely, it is clear that they refer to only the present older generation as more conservative, more authoritarian and more security-oriented than present younger generations. This is not surprising, considering the historical conditions in which today's older generations (in the US and western Europe) came of age.

In contrast to this, the biography of future pensioners will be characterized by the extension of social security systems, by the development of liberal democracies and by a long period of relative peace. Thus, the coming generations of pensioners will be *political* and undoubtedly play a more influential role in decision making, be it on the individual level, e.g. concerning their living arrangements, or on collective grounds within the framework of representative democracy. On the one hand, this will lead to the foundation of new political organizations. On the other hand, existing organizations, like unions and political parties, will experience

and have to adapt to their own aging, due to the increasing number of their members growing older.⁹

The Austrian Situation

In Austria, a country with almost 8 million inhabitants, more than 25% of the voters (1.6 million) are above 60 years of age. On average, 38% of them are members of senior citizen organizations, which are mostly linked to political parties. The largest organization (300,000 members) is the *Pensionistenverband*, affiliated with the Social Democratic Party. The *Seniorenbund*, a part of the conservative Austrian People's Party has almost 250,000 members. In some regions the respective parties have fewer members than their affiliates for older citizens.

For a long time, political participation of older persons in Austria has been restricted to voting instead of being systematically involved in creating policies and institutions at the local, regional and federal level. However, one can now see the first signs of change in the area of aging policy and administration.

During the past five years, new officials or new departments responsible for aging issues have been established in most provinces. While this is often paralleled by the establishment of Senior

Citizen Councils, there are no proposals to put a minister or secretary explicitly in charge of senior affairs as in Germany.

Calling for the explicit involvement of older citizens will become a major issue during coming decades. It will be especially important for all interest organizations to deal with this issue, and with the expectations and claims of older adherents in order to secure their organizational basis and their political influence. In order to meet the growing diversity of interests, orientations and needs within the older population, it will be important to create different designs of participation on several political levels.

First, organizational designs are necessary in which different groups of older people, such as activists or those interested in innovative forms of housing, can articulate and advocate their interests. Second, organiza-



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tional settings for different tasks and topical aims should be promoted, such as clubs in the field of cultural activities, initiatives supporting generational exchange, or self-help groups encouraging individual competence.

Finally, institutional structures and political administration should be implemented in such a way that they correspond to demographic shifts. This can be achieved, for instance, by increasing the number and the influence of inhabitants' councils in old-age or nursing homes and through the introduction of participatory mechanisms for older citizens in communal decision-making.

At the same time there needs to be a platform for advocating issues that are of common concern to older people. This can be accomplished by establishing relevant senior citizens' councils at the regional and national level. In developing options for participation, the following questions should be kept in mind: Which types of participation processes should be developed (or adapted) for older people? What are topics that concern old people altogether? Which subjects concern subgroups? How can modes of participation cater to people with divergent needs?

Ideally, political participation could enable old people to remain a part of society, at the same time giving them an opportunity to shape their environment so as to allow many forms of aging, including those which do not include productivity in the context of economic performance. The question is in how far those elderly people who cannot or do not want to comply to "productivity" norms can participate in decision-making and who will protect the interests of those who can not do so themselves. It remains to be seen if—and in which type of organization—Austria's heterogeneous older people will stand up for their social inclusion and equal treatment in the framework of different political cultures. ■



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