



## Contact Email for July 2018

### Ageing

Progress in understanding ageing and the idea of retirement has not moved very much, over the past two millennium. As long ago as 44 BC, the Roman philosopher Cicero (10643 B.C.) wrote an essay "Concerning Old Age" where he argued that old age is not a failing mind and illness. Rather, he suggested, an enlightened approach to old age would see it in terms of positive opportunities and productive possibilities because in old age it is finally possible for people to be freed from the pursuits of their earlier life and focus on the activities they find stimulating. Cicero also points out there is a distinction between "normal old" and the "sick old" and argues that we should not assume old age is automatically linked to illness. Illness is always something that is added to the life of a person and not a consequence of it. His understanding of psychology shows when he adds that to assume in the old an automatically failing mind is a fallacy and memory loss in older people is selective. Older people, he suggests, only forget the things they are no longer interested in and can't be bothered with in their everyday lives. As he quips: "I never yet heard of any veteran whose memory was so weakened by time as to forget where he had concealed his treasure". Cicero reports his own experience that his fears about getting old have been replaced by a new enthusiasm for life.

All of that seems very modern. However, for a long time now the study of 'ageing' has been dominated by the 'medical model'. Gerontology took off in the 1970's at a time when the end of life for many people was in their fifties or late sixties, preceded by periods of illness. The major change that has come with the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that the period of decline and death has been pushed on. People in their late sixties and seventies are no longer looking forward to death but to life. The situation that we have to get used to is that what was expected in people in their sixties and early seventies is now what is expected of people in their eighties and even nineties. People who retire in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are expecting twenty to thirty years of living before they succumb to the end of life. Of course some people in this new age group will get sick, some will have heart attacks or get cancer. But then so do some people in their thirties, forties and fifties or even younger. This is a new period of life that societies around the world will have to come to terms with.

This change in the structure of society is not just a demographic phenomenon, it reaches out into a myriad of niches in life, some of which we would least expect. It touches language, marketing, housing, regional development, economics, education, work and much more. The future belongs, not to the young but the old and this understanding in itself will demand from us a major re-think of our society and its politics.

One way into this re-think is to take careful note of W. H. Auden's comments on the way we occupy ourselves in life. He observes there is an essential difference between work and labour and goes on to declare that for a person to be happy they must feel both free and important in their society's estimation. When a person is compelled by society to do what they do not enjoy doing and are treated by employers as having no intrinsic value or importance, except as an economic liability, the state of this person is in effect a slave. Auden declares that a person is 'labourer' if the job society offers him or her is of no interest but is compelled to take it by the

necessity of earning a living and supporting his or her family. He sets against this, as its antithesis, 'play'. Indicating that when we play a game, we enjoy what we are doing, otherwise we should not play it, but it is a purely private activity; and unless we become a professional at playing, society could not care less whether we play it or not. Between these two Auden declares there stands 'work'. A person is a worker when they are personally interested in and enjoys the job which society pays them to do and what from the point of view of an employer is necessary labour, from the person's point of view it is paid play.

This situation does not depend on the type of work but what the individual finds a satisfying occupation in their life. What retirement has come to mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is superannuation which provides the opportunity to be free of the compulsion of labour, and time to enjoy the freedom of 'work'; doing what the individual finds satisfying rather than labouring at a task for someone else's benefit.

Time to 'work' in this sense is the major difference in people's lives as they move into a long retirement. The changing demography is not the starting point of understanding our developing society it is a time when people can follow their own interests in ways that will benefit the whole society.

The literature in general has not understood this. Gubrium and Holstein's (2000) Reader on "Aging and Everyday Life" has 38% of its contributions originally published between the 1960's and 1980's, even one from the 90's had a paper dealing with conditions in the mid 1880's. This is not to say that there is no value in what these articles have to say, but in understanding them it is vital that we realise the conditions that pertain now were not accepted even in the 1980's or 90's. My attempt to draw attention to the developing situation in 1985 only met with political indifference.

Here again it is important that sociology understands the social implications of development in the medical model, and is able to get the same recognition for their contribution as their medical counter parts. We still have a lot of work to do to make this happen.

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