

# From old age to third age: the historical course of the identities linked to the process of ageing

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This article discusses the historical emergence of notions of old age and third age as identity categories linked to the process of ageing. Their emergence can be understood as a result of a complex combination of factors such as medical and social knowledge, management agents, political movements and economic interests. By taking old age and third age as historically determined age identities, we seek to trace out the formation of these identities the article analyzes the factors that determined their emergence and how they have grown and gained legitimacy. As an age category, 'old age' has its roots mainly in medical knowledge specialized in the study of the aged body, and the appearance of retirement. The 'third age' age category derives mainly from the specialization of the agents of management for ageing, the advocatory discourse of social gerontology and the interests of the consumer culture. These are the categories that are currently available to identify, define and, more recently, transform the process of contemporary ageing.

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The unmistakable ageing of the population is a topic that has received attention from many fields of culture, becoming the subject of discussion and throwing up a mixture of innovations and challenges for the collective management of social 'issues'. In academic studies of old age, there has been a concerted effort to analyze, problematize and propose new ways of understanding ageing. Such investigations derive from the most varied of disciplines, including medicine, psychology, sociology and anthropology, not to mention the new discipline that seeks to integrate specialized discourse on the topic, gerontology.

Any observation of the cultural manifestations of ageing in current times brings to light significant changes in the habits, images, beliefs and terms used to characterize this period of life. Aside from the traditional ideas that associate the later stages of life with rest, quiet and inactivity, there are new habits, images and practices that are connecting the process of ageing with activity, learning, flexibility, personal fulfillment and unprecedented relationships of a loving and affective nature. The potential range of descriptions of ageing has expanded to such an extent that 'old age' as we know it now is joined by 'third age' and its vast associated array of new possibilities.

The need to understand this process of change in contemporary ageing has led us to reflect upon the categories of identity and terms used to describe this period that an increasing number of individuals now goes through. We therefore deemed it necessary to trace the historical course of the notions of old age and third age so as to comprehend how these identities were formed, the factors that gave rise to them and what features currently define them. As we look back at the roots of the notions of old age and third age, we will give precedence to studies from the areas of sociology and anthropology with a view to emphasizing the discursive and imaginary aspects which help define them.

From this perspective, the emergence of the notions of old age and third age could be understood as the outcome of a complex process involving political discourse, social behaviors, economic interests and specialized disciplines. The analysis of the development of these notions presents us with intricate webs that combine medical knowledge, management agents and experts with the emergence of age identities that are not only part of our cultural imaginary, but in many ways will dictate the terms by which we describe ourselves and our lives.

### **Age categories and modernity**

The emergence of age categories is closely linked to the process of social ordering seen in western societies in modern times. Hareven (1995) explains that until the beginning of the nineteenth century, demographic, social and cultural factors were such that pre-industrial societies did not draw any clear distinction or have any specialized functions for each age group. The large age gaps between children from the same family, the absence of any specific regulations for working hours and the cohabitation of extended families are just a few factors that conspired to prevent a life span from being split up into specific stages.

As of the nineteenth century, differences between ages gradually started to appear, alongside specialized functions, habits and spaces for each age group. It was at this time that the life span was first segmented into more formal stages, when strict, uniform transitions between one stage and another started to emerge, as well as a spatial separation of different age groups.

In other words, the recognition of old age as one stage in people's lives is part of a broader historical process whereby new stages of life have emerged, such as childhood and adolescence, and is part of an ongoing trend towards greater segregation of age groups within families and social spaces.

This is exemplified by historian Philippe Ariès (1978) in his study of the historical emergence of 'childhood' as a category. This work is a standard reference for any investigation into ageing, since it is one of the best known examples of a historical study into the social construction of a life stage. According to Ariès, childhood emerged as a distinct stage of life from adulthood, with its own idiosyncrasies, spaces, habits and behaviors, as a result of changes to family life and a distinction between public and private spheres, which culminated in the establishment of new relationships of intimacy and privacy in families. This linkage of the emergence of childhood with the emergence of the modern family has inspired historical studies into age categories, including the study of old age.

The gradual stabilization of age categories throughout the nineteenth century was such that by the twentieth century there was much greater uniformity within age groupings, with a reasonably clear transition between different age groups and institutionalized rites of passage, such as entry to school, university and retirement (Hareven, 1995). The stability of these categories makes it much easier to establish age identities, which define how it is to 'inhabit' each of these life stages in terms of behavior, beliefs, bodily habits, ideals of fulfillment, and a whole set of other factors. In actual fact, the identification with being a child, teenager or adult constitutes much of the identity of modern subjects. The growing institutionalization of the different stages of life and the identification of subjects with particular age categories seems to have reached practically all spheres of life, making itself felt in family life, the work environment, State institutions, the consumer market and intimate relationships.

In this article, we focus exclusively on issues that have brought about the discursive and perceptual emergence of the notion of old age. Factors such as the ageing of the population and demographic growth are of unquestionable importance, but will not be discussed here.<sup>1</sup>

### **The emergence of old age: senescence and non-productivity**

In this article, we adopt as our hypothesis an assumption found in numerous studies which links the emergence of old age to the modernization of western society (Blaikie, 1999; Debert, 1999; Katz 1995, 1996). These studies indicate that the historical changes inherent to this process of modernization have affected not only the way life is split up into stages, the difference between these stages and the sensibilities that have come to categorize each of them, but more crucially have led to an understanding of the course of life as a significant social institution (Debert, 1999).

It would appear from these studies that there has been a transition from one culture, in whose social organization chronological age had no specific function, to another, where age is a key factor in identifying social distinctions, designates different categories, and serves as a model for individuals' identities. Likewise, Katz (1995, 1996), whose studies are based on Foucault's concept of disciplinary society, assumes that the history of old age bound up with the history of the course of modern life. Thus, old age emerges as a discursive product of the

involvement of its subjects in the modern series of disciplining, and is particularly the outcome of the investment of medical discourse into the aged body.

Old age can be seen as first being conceived as a distinct stage of life at the turn of the twentieth century, when a number of specific changes and a convergence of different discourses ultimately reorganized the course of life and set the backdrop for the emergence of old age. Two factors stand out as fundamental in this process: the production of new medical knowledge about the aged body, and the institutionalization of pensions.

Geriatrics and gerontology are the areas of knowledge that investigate the aged body and the social aspects of old age, respectively, and are mostly responsible for its establishment as a social category. Though geriatrics only became established as a scientific discipline in the twentieth century, Katz (1995) has identified pre-geriatric knowledge that he calls 'discourse about senescence'. Referring to the changes to medicine in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries described by Foucault (1998), Katz identifies the emergence of a new way of understanding illness, where the body became the focus of medical attention and source of changes that characterized disease, resulting in the definition of the aged body.

From then on, modern medicine reconstructed the body based on its pathological anatomy, seeking to characterize its tissues and cells on the microscopic level to explain how the body degenerates. Gradually, old age came to be understood as a specific physiological state whose main characteristics were grouped under the label of senescence. The work by Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893), François Broussais (1772–1838), and especially Marie François Xavier Bichat (1771–1802) is representative of this discourse, which determined the recognition of the aged body, its identification as a decomposing body, and the definition and acknowledgement of these characteristics as a specific task for medical knowledge and investigation.

The discourse about senescence supplanted renaissance conceptions of death, and the limits of longevity and old age. Previously, death was understood as a hurdle to be overcome, and longevity, especially the exceptional cases of centenarians, was regarded as both a rather fantastic, magical event and as revealing the human body's own rationale. Old age, longevity, and death were studied from a medical and philosophical perspective. The shift to modern medicine took old age and aging as clinical problems, biological certainties and invariable processes. Death has become the result of diseases specific to old age, longevity has insurmountable biological limits, and old age is an inevitable stage of life during which the body degenerates.

This discourse about senescence gave rise to geriatrics, a medical discipline that studies the aged body. It emerged in the early twentieth century, around 1910, with the founding work of American physician Ignatz Nascher, the first physiologist to describe the clinical pillars for identifying old age. By observing the body of old people, he defined the biological characteristics of old age – the deterioration of the body –, conceptualized the medical treatment to be dispensed to old people, and introduced the term 'geriatrics' to the medical literature (Hareven, 1995). Thus was old age scientifically differentiated from other stages of life and identifiable by means of medical knowledge.

Geriatrics not only distinguishes old age from other stages of life, but also defines it as physical decline. Laslett (1991) highlights the importance and influence of the medical

metaphor of old age on the cultural imaginary, the main outcome of which has been an identification of old age with illness. Current geriatric discourse has made an effort to unlock this association, but Laslett suggests that this is a controversial process which ultimately comes up against resistance from the very way medical knowledge works. Quoting the specific case of Alzheimer's Disease, the author suggests that its definition is not yet crystallized: while some authors see Alzheimer's as a degenerative disease that affects the brain of old people, for others it is the very process of degeneration itself; in other words, the aging of the brain.

Since it was first conceptualized, the medical metaphor for old age has had a strong influence on society, defining not just the physical nature of ageing, but also the images of what it is like to age. People's perceptions have been affected by the widespread acceptance and justification of this metaphor, to the point that they make use of characteristics originating from medical discourse to define themselves and describe their experience. In fact, the medical definition of old age has spread into other areas of knowledge, broadly determining its range in the cultural imaginary, feeding into State discourse, welfare policymaking, and the formation of other disciplines, such as gerontology.

The roots of gerontology as a specialized discipline are more complex and dispersed than those of geriatrics.<sup>2</sup> According to Katz (1996), the term was coined in 1913 by Ilya Ilyich Metchnikoff, a physician who studied under Charcot, though it originally referred only to medical procedures designed to prolong life. Throughout the twentieth century, different fields, such as popular beliefs, demography, and social sciences, conspired to establish gerontology as a scientific discipline of a multidisciplinary nature. Sociology and psychology were fundamental to its emergence, drawing the focus away from medical issues to the 'psychosocial' aspects of old age. Not only would the aged body, studied by geriatrics, be the subject of specialized knowledge, but now also the habits, practices and social and psychological needs of old people would come into focus, incorporating new factors into the definition of old age and making it more complex as a category.

The widening of the scope of the disciplines investigating old age is related to the institutionalization of pensions, the second factor we highlight as fundamental to establishing the category of old age. A result of industrialization, pensions gradually took root in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in response to the changes and problems that arose during this process.

Lenoir (mars-avr. 1979) makes a detailed analysis of the impact in the French scenario of the institutionalization of retirement and the consequent appearance of management agents on the definition of old age as a separate age group, and later, the definition of third age. In the second half of the nineteenth century, old age started to appear in the discourse of social legislators, giving rise to the creation of specific institutions, such as pension funds, and the progressive specialization of certain institutions as old people's homes.

Even though the first pension schemes were created in the 1700s, for civil servants and members of the armed forces, the issue of pensions was not a topic of general interest until the first generations of workers started to age. The first political discussions about the creation of the French Caisse nationale date back to 1850, when the issue was raised of how those workers who could no longer support themselves through work should be assured basic living conditions. The aging of workers was equated with disability, or the incapacity to produce.

This meant that old age seen in the same way as all the disabilities that affected the working classes, and was used to identify those people who could no longer work as they reached the end of their lives. It was this rationale of associating old age to disability that informed the creation of pension schemes by business owners. They were part of a wider strategy designed to assure acceptable levels of discipline and workers' profitability.

The appearance of pension schemes in France came about within the broader context of concerns in the second half of the nineteenth century about the 'danger to society' represented by the working masses. Social welfare institutions, such as pension funds and insurance schemes, were part of a strategy designed by the country's policymakers to respond to what was perceived as the great problem of society at the time. Even so, Lenoir (mars-avr. 1979) notes that the origins of the social welfare systems should not be attributed only to the capitalist interests of businessmen, since the political movement of certain categories of workers and the disputes for legitimacy amongst the ruling classes – the industrial bourgeoisie and the conservative aristocracy – also had a bearing on the issue.<sup>3</sup>

The institutionalization of pension schemes led to the creation of agents specialized in the management of old age, the transfer of responsibility for the management of old age from families to these new specialized agents, and greater autonomy for this age group. Also, one other consequence stands out in defining the emerging identity of old age as a distinct group: the unequivocal equation of old age with disability. Effectively, at a time when the capacity and position of the working individual was what defined them above all else, retirement did indeed mean being disabled, incapable and idle. This identification of old age with incapacity only recently came to be challenged.

Laslett (1991) notes a similarity between the images of old age expressed in different fields of society in the early 1900s and attributes this to the picking up of medical metaphors by legislators and social policymakers. The campaigns for pension rights made great use of the deprecatory definitions of old age from the discourse of geriatrics, using them as a strategy to call for specific policies for old people. The discourse of gerontology was also involved in the institutionalization of pensions, and helped expand discussions about the rights of pensioners to include social, psychological, and cultural issues in the list of policy demands.

Even if the identification between old age and disability is the outcome of the institutionalization of pensions that has become most entrenched in the cultural imaginary, its establishment has helped reinforce old age as a political category. Pensioners are no longer just individuals who are incapable of working, but are subjects contemplated by the law with the right to certain privileges in society, whose acknowledgement allows them to claim benefits in the name of a category. Disability may be a pejorative, stigmatizing characteristic, but it has also opened up a new subjective stance for old age. Katz (1996) raises this double-edged aspect of the institution of pensions: "If the pension movement differentiated the elderly as special, needy, dependent, and unproductive, it also politicized them by creating a position of radical subjectivity from which the elderly could demand their rights *as the elderly*" (p.67).<sup>4</sup>

The establishment of old age as a social category marked by physical decline and disability as well as the legitimacy conferred by specific rights was followed by a period during which it gained considerable importance in society. Groisman (1999) and Debert (1999) both regard the 1960s and 70s as the second period of great change in the history of old age, during which

time it came to be seen as a collective issue and was paid greater attention by different segments of society. While gerontology sees this as a direct result of the increasing number of old people, which is undoubtedly an important fact in the history of old age, it fails to explain the whole picture behind the emergence of old age as a socially significant issue.

Debert (1999) refers to this process as the socialization of aging and lists a number of factors as contributing to the conception of old age as a social issue. The widespread institutionalization of pensions and especially the resulting economic changes are understood as one of the key factors that made old age a collective issue. The universalization of pension schemes affected the structure of private companies, households, and above all the State, which started to take responsibility for a whole contingent of individuals.<sup>5</sup>

Lenoir (mars-avr. 1979) identifies the widespread introduction of pension schemes as the main factor behind the changes seen in the care of the aged in France between 1945 and 1960. In this period, new institutions were established that drew a line between those institutions specialized in the management of old age and those devoted to caring for the poor. The hospital system, social security and welfare introduced new regulations and specific services for old people, separating them spatially and legally from the care given to the poor and needy. This process of separating the aged from the poor strengthened the autonomy of old age as a category, which was gaining ground but still only sporadically. Meanwhile, the organization and unification of the specialized discourses were intimately linked with the appearance of the notion of “third age” some time in the 1960s.

### **The emergence of the third age: specialization, engagement and consumption**

The emergence of ‘third age’ is discussed in the specialized literature as one of the greatest changes the history of old age has gone through. In fact, the transformation of the sensibilities invested in old age has led to a profound inversion of the values it is associated with. If before it was understood as physical decline and disability, a moment of rest and quiet in which solitude and affective isolation prevailed, now it has come to mean a moment of leisure suitable for any personal realization that may have been unfulfilled in earlier years, the adoption of new habits, hobbies and skills, and the cultivation of affective and loving relationships outside the family.

There is little material available about the historical emergence of the category of third age, especially if compared with the literature on the history of old age. The fact that the notion emerged so recently – it was first mentioned in France and Britain around 1950 but only became more established in the 1980s – may explain the absence of more systematic studies into its formation and the historical circumstances surrounding it. Even so, some factors may be identified that are related to the emergence of the third age category and representing accompanying influences, positive factors or trends.

Laslett (1991) considers greater longevity and the improved quality of life brought about by medical technological breakthroughs, as well as the emergence of pensions as the main factors which grant individuals entry to the third age. However, if we intend to understand third age as a social, historically constructed category whose appearance within public space has given rise to new identities, it is then necessary to try to identify the factors that have

permitted, influenced or encouraged its emergence and its endorsement in the cultural imaginary. We will highlight as potentially contributory factors for the emergence of third age the widespread availability and reorganization of retirement schemes, the substitution of terms for referring to old age, the discourse of social gerontology, and the interests of the consumer culture.

In an analysis of the French scenario, Lenoir (mars-avr. 1979) attributes the emergence of the notion of third age to the new organization of the agents of management of old age. As already mentioned, until the mid 1900s, the institutions for taking care of the aged and the discourse that sustained them were fragmented and disorganized. From around 1945 to the 1960s, the discourses and practices devoted to old age were improved, unified and developed. Signs of this can be seen in the formulation of an 'old age policy', the development of gerontology, and the appearance of the notion of third age. In this period, pension schemes were made available to all classes of workers, reorganizing the agents responsible for the management of old age. At the same time, there came to be a widespread understanding that old age was a social problem, and social welfare and old people's homes were replaced by pension funds and geriatric centers. There was a gradual dissociation of old age and poverty, and a new category, 'third age', emerged.

In fact, Lenoir (mars-avr. 1979) sees this more as a new age category fitting between maturity and old age than an actual negation of old age. The autonomy of this new category can be seen in the pairs of opposites that started to appear in social space alongside the reorganization of specialized agents: third age as opposed to old age; active retirement rather than passive retirement; resting home and not old people's home; and gerontology rather than social welfare. Clearly, this new representation of a stage of life would not have taken root if its descriptive capacity did not correspond to the concerns and demands in people's everyday lives. Also, during the 1960s and 70s, the urban middle classes started to reach retirement age, given that they joined the production chains later than less skilled workers. This social group had different social and cultural habits and more sophisticated aspirations and consumer needs, which were then met by new specialized agents. With the aim of appealing to a differentiated clientele, the pension funds started to offer not only financial benefits, but also specialized services and new activities, like clubs, organized holidays, special housing, leisure activities, interest groups, etc.

For there to be some parity between the growing demands of these individuals and the supply of specialized services, the know-how of specialists in the humanities was needed to identify and describe more precisely their living conditions and desires. Their psychological and cultural profile started to be considered more seriously, with universities being created and specific social spaces for the third age. The input of these specialists helped consolidate this new lifestyle based on a set of behaviors, using a new kind of language and helping to build up the new age identity.

The parallels between the emerging notion of third age and the middle classes have been given particular attention by Lenoir (mars-avr. 1979), who believes that the overlap between the main characteristics of the latter and the images that comprise the identity of the former is far from random. The middle classes have all the factors that make them as a group more like to age. They, more than any other group, are predisposed to turn to the knowledge and



input of specialists, and they cultivate individualism and the psychological intimacy that make them more inclined as individuals to invest in specific identities. These characteristics make the middle classes the population group that has most to gain from the invention of third age, since they have the characteristics that predispose them to be engaged in it.

'Old' is no longer a suitable term for these 'youthful old people' and their new lifestyle, so a new word, elderly, started being employed, which was more respectful and distinguished this group from the average layers of society. Peixoto (1998) analyzes the use of the words 'old' (*velho* in Portuguese) and 'elderly' (*idoso* in Portuguese) in both France and in Brazil, showing the course of change that has affected the public usage of terms related to ageing. 'Old' was strongly associated to the signs of physical decline and productive incapacity. It was typically used to designate poor old men and had a marked pejorative connotation. As of the 1960s, the term started to disappear from official documents in France, where it started to be replaced by 'elderly', a less stereotyped term. While official documents introduced this new term, the lifestyle of the middle classes started to be adopted by all classes of retired people, who absorbed the images of old age associated with the art of the *bon viveur*. Then, the term 'third age' started to be used, formalizing, stabilizing and endorsing the new sensitivity invested in these youthful, respected retirees. Clearly, this new term derives from and contributes decisively to the creation and acceptance of a new, positive image of old age.<sup>6</sup>

Commenting on the Brazilian reality, Peixoto (1998) argues that third age is a term imported from France, while 'old' has gradually been substituted by 'elderly' in official documents. However, the ambiguities inherent to the Brazilian reality gives certain images more subtle meanings. Thus, the term 'old' has held its ground and is often used to refer to old people from the poorer classes, while 'elderly', a more respectful word, tends to be used more for the middle and upper classes.

Apart from the widespread availability of pensions and the introduction of new terms for referring to old age, two other factors stand out as crucial for the emergence of third age as a category: the discourse of social gerontology and the consumer culture, whose interconnection is analyzed by Featherstone and Hepworth (1995). They examined the images of old age that appear in the British media and identified the same topics as those discussed by the specialized, academic discourse of social gerontology. They particularly found a similarity between the assumptions of 'positive ageing'<sup>7</sup> bandied in the media and the official claims of gerontology.

As mentioned before, gerontology has grown in importance based on the requirements of the complexities of policies and institutions for retirement, basing its main assumptions on the medical metaphor for old age supplied by geriatrics. The first social theories about ageing formulated in the formative years of gerontology aimed to analyze and explain the negative perception of old age. The theory of disengagement consisted of the assumption that the incapacity to work would make old people unsuitable for significant roles in society, causing them to experience loneliness and social exclusion. The activity theory, for its turn, supposes that positive ageing can be attained if subjects remain active, continue with the same habits as they had in adult life, and take on significant roles in society (Blaikie, 1999).

Both theories have been criticized, but it is interesting to note that the theory of activity has endured, albeit with great modifications, giving rise to the most recent formulations of social gerontology. Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) suggest that the central argument of

gerontology is founded on the understand that ageing is a social construct that is especially linked to a negative image which, if altered, could make room for building a positive image of the same process. Inspired by the theory of social constructivism, the gerontologists started to advocate a radical deconstruction and shift in the negative images of ageing and a subsequent building up of positive imagery for old age. To do so, it would be necessary to formulate a sufficiently consistent new discourse that could unlatch the association between old age and stigmatizing signs such as disease, disability, disengagement and decline.

Two topics were considered fundamental for the construction of positive ageing and became explicit aims of the specialized literature: a critical attack on the belief that old age is essentially a disease, and the creation of a new identity for old age.

The first of these aims actually meant deconstructing the medical metaphor formulated by geriatrics. To social gerontology, normal ageing encompasses a number of biological processes that do not necessarily result in serious physical or mental damage to the individual. Based on this rationale, the problems that appear in old age could be attributed to specific clinical pathologies for which there are or will be medical treatment, such as Alzheimer's Disease, or the effects of the very stigma of old age, which could be overcome by policies and programs to include these individuals in society, education, and general awareness raising.

The second aim of social gerontology was the creation of a new, positive identity for old age, which would encompass kinds of behavior associated to the new ages and rites of passage, both a far cry from the traditional, static notion of a homogeneous, undifferentiated period of decline. This strategy was compatible with the main argument of the theories of social construction: if the negative identity of old age is the result of certain cultural conditions, then once the former image of old age is done away with, a new, positive identity can be actively constructed. This would be the fruit of coordinated action between different practices, habits, languages and especially the point of view used to interpret them. Gerontology does not just corroborate the adoption of a new lifestyle for third age, it actually encourages it, spreading the news about the benefits to be gleaned from the engagement of individuals in this 'new way of ageing'.

This assumption about the relationship between the discourse of gerontology and the notion of third age could be contrasted with a number of studies which indicate that gerontology has adopted the depreciative metaphors about old age in its political demands. Debert (1999) understands this ambiguity as a twin-pronged movement within the discourse of gerontology: while it speaks out about the 'conspiracy of silence', as Simone de Beauvoir called society's response to old age in modern societies, with the aim of raising awareness about the abandonment of the aged and defending the importance of caring for this group, it also preaches the possibility of 'inventing' a new identity, with a new lifestyle within everyone's grasp if they will only adopt it.

There has been a considerable amount of interaction, connection and cross-fertilization between the images of ageing defended by social gerontology and those circulating in the media due to economic interests. Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) note a marked similarity between the positive connotations of old age bandied by the consumer culture and the images that gerontology is at pains to divulge. The task of constructing a third age, or positive ageing, has spread beyond the academic and professional domain of a specialized discipline to become a topic of great significance in the media and consumer culture.

As Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) see it, the 'ageing industry' – coined by Thomas Cole to refer to the growing sensitivity on the part of marketing agents to the potential of the new markets for the middle and advanced age groups – is an important force behind the emergence of the notion of third age. Thus far, this group did not have the wherewithal to be attractive subjects for planners of consumption strategies. Anyone over 50 years of age was perceived as financially challenged and unworthy of harboring the desire to be engaged in a lifestyle based on consumerism, which would be restricted to younger age groups. This picture started to change with the emergence of the first generations of middle class retirees, whose consumption potential was quickly picked up by marketeers. The over-fifties started to be recognized as the only group in western societies with readily available and as yet untapped financial resources, i.e. not tied up in any existing consumer habits.

These changes are closely related to the institutionalization of the planning of pensions, which gradually developed in the UK as of 1950. Private commercial interests, especially from 1980 onward, took advantage of the vacuum left by public policy regarding pension planning and became quite influential in constructing positive images of life after formal employment. The acknowledgement and investment of commercial and financial agents in the planning of retirement helped shape the new picture of what old age is, consolidating the connection between planned retirement, the notion of third age, and the consumer culture. This connection is clear in the strategy adopted by Jeff Ostroff, an American expert in marketing for the over fifties. Ostroff defines his strategy as a soft sell: a blend of recommendations about the consumption of goods and services linked up to information and advice about enrichment and the empowerment of the new old (Featherstone, Hepworth, 1995). Featherstone and Hepworth (p.33) draw attention to the ambiguity underlying the economic interests and marketing strategies that target individuals from the third age:

Although there is a sense in which the soft sell exploits the hopes and aspirations of older people – in particular – the 'dream' of an idyllic retirement which is a persistent legacy from our Victorian past – it is also the case that such commercialized images do promote an anti-ageist perspective and in this sense at least help to promote the cause of positive aging in an 'greying world'.

The interaction between these diverse factors, especially the specialization of the management agents involved in the organization of retirement, the engaged discourse of social gerontology, and the interests and characteristics of the consumer culture, seem to have contributed decisively to the appearance of the notion of third age.

## **Conclusion**

In sketching this historical narrative about the notions of old age and third age, we have highlighted certain factors, especially ones that derive from the fields of sociology and anthropology. This has given us an analysis perspective which we recognize as being partial and particularly inclined to comprehend them as discursive formations which partake of the cultural imaginary, suitable for a wealth of debate. From this position, we can see how the formation of these age categories has resulted from a variety of changes to collective life, which have culminated in the emergence of experiences, habits and images that did not previously exist.

Further, for an age category of this kind to take root as an effective resource for the formation of personal identities, it must be endorsed, solidified and disseminated in the cultural imaginary if it is to become a point of reference for a large number of individuals. It would appear that the categories analyzed have indeed passed through these processes: old age around the turn of the twentieth century, and third age in the last decades of the same century.

Having analyzed the historical emergence of the notions of old age and third age, we can turn to the relationship between them: has third age completely replaced the identity of old age, or do both coexist within contemporary cultural imaginary? Can third age effectively be understood as a new identity, or is it a reformulation of the former identity of old age? Could they be two possible courses for ageing in contemporary times, or are they identities that succeed one another in time, corresponding to different periods of life, with third age relating to a period of activity and productivity and old age as a time of rest and physical decline?

If we look at what differentiates the two notions and identities, it would seem that it is quite clear. The characteristics of each age identity and the course they have taken have strengthened them as identities in the cultural imaginary and enhanced their independence. They are terms that have come to rise under quite different circumstances and are associated to distinct historical periods, medical and social concepts, political movements, and interests. However, we may still ask ourselves whether they are effectively used by individuals to refer to different experiences or whether they are randomly interchanged in daily usage.

As for the relationship established in the cultural imaginary between the identities of old age and third age, we believe there are few elements that could define it precisely and thereby answer the questions we have posed in this conclusion. However, one issue must be raised for future discussions of this topic: if the rise of the positive images connected to third age as a consequence of their positive associations ultimately rule out the chance of experiencing old age as a period of quiet, rest and inactivity – characteristics closer to the description of old age – then we will certainly have lost out in the diversity of ways that life can be led and satisfaction can be gleaned for different individuals. In this sense, even if we cannot make any precise statements about the fate of old age in contemporary times, it is our belief that the two identities in question will coexist within the cultural imaginary, providing a broader range of descriptions and possibilities for individuals to experience satisfaction in their lives.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of these factors, see “A antropologia e o estudo dos grupos e das categorias de idade” (Debert, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Debert (1999) takes a different view of the emergence of geriatrics and gerontology. She assumes that geriatrics emerged within gerontology and gradually gained independence as of the 1960s. However, we consider Katz’s analysis (1995) of the connection between geriatrics, modern medicine and the ‘discourse of senescence’ sufficiently compelling to take the beginning of the twentieth century as the period when geriatrics emerged, gained independence as a discipline, and influenced the emergence of gerontology.

<sup>3</sup> For more details on the dynamics of the different players involved in the process of formation of retirement institutions, see Lenoir (mars-avr. 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Peixoto (1998) notes that in France, the State's taking over of responsibility for care for the elderly was one part of the process of organization after the revolution, during which the State took on a variety of functions which had previously been left to the family group.

<sup>5</sup> The first French university for the third age was opened in Toulouse in 1973. In 1979, the publication date of the study in question, there were more than thirty such universities. According to Lenoir (mars-avr. 1979), the universities for the third age propose to combine academic activities with leisure and social activities, placing them somewhat ambiguously between "education" and "entertainment".

<sup>6</sup> Laslett (1991) believes that the term '*troisième âge*' has already taken on a pejorative connotation in France, directly replacing the term 'old', along with the depreciatory images that were associated with it. The author believes this is the most likely fate of the term 'third age'. However, we did not find any similar opinion expressed by the other authors consulted.

<sup>7</sup> Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) prefer the term 'positive ageing' to refer to the positive images of old age that started to appear in the UK in the 1960s. We will draw no distinction between positive ageing and third age, since it is exactly these positive images of old age that seem to comprise the identity of third age.

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