

THE INSTITUTIONAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE THIRD AGE: SHIFTS AND INTERFACES

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The paper presents the constructions of the old age from the point of view of the elderly. On the macro-level, the division of the life-course and the meanings related to the specific life stages are dominated by the influence of the process of institutionalisation. The formal sector of the social security system codifies the later life, according to impersonal, centrally controlled, structurally definable principles. The cultural category of old age is formed on the micro-level, and its roots are mostly in the inner mechanisms of the ageing and the inside understanding of the elderly population. The paper presents the results of an anthropological study conducted in Romania. Significant shifts seem to exist between the agricultural and the non-agricultural population. The article brings out the complexity of the third age: the analysis presents the principles of the different constructions of old age, their limits, and the interactive relation between them.

Keywords: institutionalisation of the old age, pension system, cultural meanings, cultural ageing.

Old age is much more than just a physical state even if it is a stage of a biological process. It is also influenced by social and cultural attitudes and conventions. The values and stigmas associated with it go beyond personal experiences, they belong to the cultural consensus worked out by local interpretative community; moreover, they belong also to the outcomes of the macro-level constructions of ageing and its interaction with micro-level understandings.

In the following analysis I focus on the constructed nature of old age. My intension is to present the interaction between the structures and factors of the macro- and micro-levels regarding the ageing, more precisely their influence on the local conception of old age. The analysis shows the limits of the macro-mechanism, in order to display where and how the influences coming from above may have impacts on the life of the population. Many shifts are, thus, revealed between the categories of the macro- and micro-levels. Moreover, there are also shifts between different social and cultural groups living near each other. This approach brings out the multiplicity of the third age. In the studied region of

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Romania, the employees and the agricultural population are differently integrated into the inactive–active–inactive paradigm used by the formally constructed pension system, therefore their life-courses' cultural scenarios demonstrate very different patterns. Based on the fieldwork made in Bacău county, I intend to analyse the shifts between these: the varying impact of the pension system in an agrarian community, the legitimation of it, and the differences between the conception and life-course of that part of the population which is integrated into the formal system and those who have remained outside. This approach leads to understand the mechanisms of the two major lines (that of the macro-level and that of the micro-level) of constructing the old age, to reveal the extended effects of both, and to disclose the relationship between them.

CONCEPTIONS OF OLD AGE IN THE SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE

In the conceptualisation of the ageing, the pension system became a core element. Even if the *institutional category of the elderly* is very popular among the scholars to detach a part of the population, the logic of “measuring” and interpreting the flow of life in this way constitutes only one dimension (Kohli 1990, 1993, 1996). The other very widespread categorizing method used by scientists and legislators is to use certain ages – mostly the 60th or the 65th year – as a demarcation line. This refers to the so called *demographic category of the elderly*. None of them are enough to overlap/ fit the notion of old-age understood by the elderly itself. The idea of *cultural ageing* and the *cultural category of the elderly* seem to be more promising, in order to come closer to the understanding of the life-course applied by the categorized people themselves.

Neither the fact that a lifetime is divided into well-defined parts, nor the existence of the borderlines between them are immanent. Both circumstances are the outcome of cultural and historical reasons. Anthropologists have demonstrated this through varied fieldwork done in rather different communities (see, for example: L'Homme, 2003). Historians (Laslett, 1989) and demographers (Bourdelaïs, 1993) have also taken a keen interest in our subject when looking at old age, especially at its lower threshold. In this line of thought let me just mention the work of Patrice Bourdelaïs who analysed the considerations, determining that this age had been separated from other life stages and the representations of old age (since the 17th century). Moreover, he also examined the ways these conceptions have changed over time. Peter Laslett is also a pioneer in research on the emergence of old age, but his perspective was oriented especially in a direction popular among sociologists since the 1990s: namely, the meanings – especially the negative ones, the stigmas – associated with this age (Laslett, 1989: 96–106). He has dealt with the image of the elderly in *belles-lettres*, too (Laslett, 1989: 134–138). The work of Pascal Pochet goes hand in hand with the former approach, but he interpreted the representation of the elderly within a broader spectrum, taking 20th century France as his example

(Pochet, 1997: 5–18). Anne-Marie Guillemard focused on the contents of retirement, and this is hardly less complicated than old age: even if its beginning seems to be more clear, its codification is subject to frequent changes, thus it can not be considered to be strongly canonized (Guillemard, 1972). Ideas about the body also brought a new perspective into discussions of the subject. The theoretical framework of Featherstone, Hepworth and Wernick emphasized that the re-definition and re-valuing of the body overwrites and reshapes the former concepts regarding ageing (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1997: 126–150; Featherstone and Wernick, 1995: 1–15). The volume edited by Featherstone and Wernick is centred around this issue, though it also includes papers about different social and cultural constructions and narratives of old age (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995).

In the post-socialist East-European region, research into the different meanings and the complexity of the definition of old age has received very little attention. With regard to Romania, I can mention only the name of Daniela Gîrleanu-Şoitu, who has dealt with the construction of the life-course in a Moldovan town (Iaşi) and its surroundings. The main problems of her work are related to my interests, but the methodology and the results are different: Daniela Gîrleanu-Şoitu bases her research on survey and interviews, so those aspects of the question which can be revealed with the help of observation in the field remain outside her horizon (Gîrleanu-Şoitu, 2006). Lucie Vidovičová's work is very similar, in that she analysed the construction of the old age in the Czech society based on the results of a survey analysis (Vidovičová, 2003). I also have to refer to Urszula Lehr, who conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the rural regions of Poland and also carried out archival research, so her approach is based on the historical, folkloristic and social aspects of the cultural meanings of the elderly (Lehr, 2007).

In the following analysis I would like to go a little bit further. I focus on the cultural meaning of ageing and old age from an interactive point of view. I analyse how the old age is formed on the interface of the macro- and micro-structure of the life-course. The article lights the contact (interfaces and tensions) between the concept of the pension system and the cultural category of old age on the basis of a community study, and its effect and consequences, as well.

METHODOLOGY AND THE OBJECT OF THE ANALYSIS

In the years 2000–2003, I had the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in three neighbouring villages in Moldova (Cădăreşti, Pajişte, Coşnea). I was interested in the situation of the elderly people in the families, the elderly care and the effect of geographical isolation on these topics. Very soon, a new question emerged. Because of the intensive emigration of the active population since the 1960s and a moderate, but still numerous, return of the previously emigrated, now retired people, a very interesting situation had come about. The demographic result of these events is that these villages contained a high average of the elderly population: in the age pyramid

they are overrepresented not only because of the lack of the young and active population, but also due to the returning retired fellow countrymen. Moreover, there was also a social consequence of these events which became a scientific challenge to me: not only did I find a cultural concept of the elderly with inner nuances and sophisticatedly altering subcategories, I also faced two “types” of elderly. The two groups had different life experiences and different careers, which led to different identities, attitudes and behaviours in the third age.

To reveal and to understand this very interesting situation, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork. I made interviews with the elderly about their life, career, family, experience of the third age, and also about their judgements on the situation of the village (migrants, not migrants, consequences of the migration, age structure of the village) to find out also the stereotypes, the local norms, namely the cognitive context. I made control interviews with the family members, neighbours and relatives about the same subjects with the intention to find out more details, to discover the outer point of view, and to have the mirror of the elderly people’s life-stories in order to understand better the subjective position of the elderly. I interviewed people from every generation (youth, adults, elderly) to obtain a more and more complex picture of the elderly, in order to understand them not only in themselves, but also in the familial and community context. In addition I gathered data about the cognitive maps of the local society to find out the level of integration and the interest of the individual in the surrounding social context. This shows the embeddedness, the multiplexity and limits of the individual’s social contacts. The interviews were completed with participant observation, focusing on the social network and social activity, in order to see whether the individuals form groups, how they do so, and what kind of groups they create for themselves.

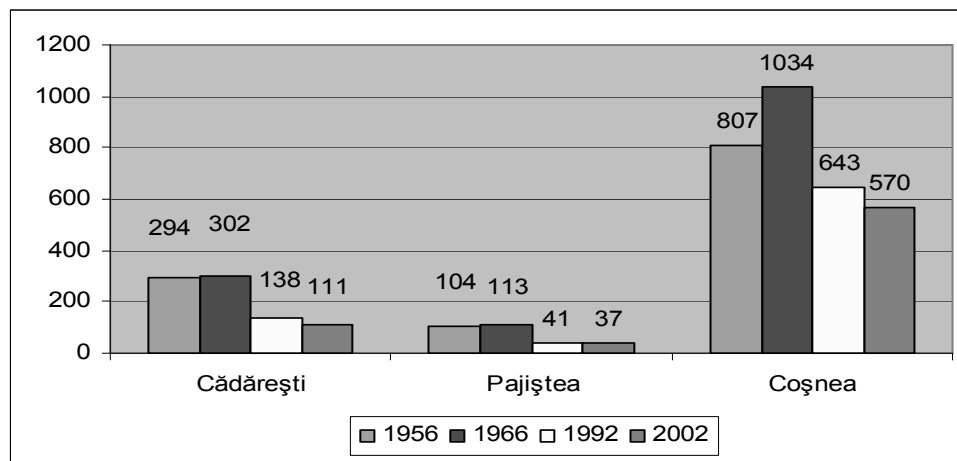
THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE MICRO-REGION AND ITS LIMITS

The economic strategy of the Romanian Socialist Party was based on collectivisation and industrialization. The former did not touch these villages so greatly. Being located in the mountains, the agricultural products were narrowed almost only to grass, so these lands were not valuable for the project of collectivisation. In 1952, the Sándor Petőfi Cooperative Company was founded in Coşnea, but very soon, 4–5 years later, the lands were redistributed to the proprietors. The forests were centralised, but private cultivation was still allowed. This does not mean that the farmers could maintain the pre-socialist strategies and earn their living as before. There were huge taxes, payments and requirements to hand in products, and they had to enter into unfavourable contracts. In addition, there was the stabilization of the currency and a currency reform, which harmed the peasantry. Meanwhile, fewer and fewer local possibilities were open for earning a living. The help of wages earned in the state sector was very limited in the region. Besides education, shops, dairy centres and a woodwork company (*Întreprinderea*

Forestieră de Exploatare și Transport) which employed a small part of the population, there were no other possibilities. The outmigration of the active inhabitants began in the 1960s. Among the push factors I also have to mention the incomplete nature of the local education system (four classes in Cădărești and Pajiștea, eight classes in Coșnea, and difficulties in accessing higher education in the region), the poor condition of medical and other important services (there was no pharmacy, there was only one telephone in each village, there was no electricity in Pajiștea until 1998, etc.). Altogether, the tendency to leave these villages became stronger and stronger.

Figure 1

Changes of the population in the last half century, 1956-2002 (number of inhabitants)



Source: Varga E. Á.

After 1989, some push factors on the side of urban life appeared, which led to return migration. Those who decided to come back were mostly pensioners. They have left the labour market, they have had a stable income (the pension) and they have finished the childrearing responsibilities. So the most important pull factors of the urban area disappeared. Meanwhile, push factors appeared related to the new economic situation. Material pressures had the greatest effect, as life in the urban regions become more and more expensive. Especially for those with low incomes – like pensioners – there seemed to be better prospects of dealing with the rising cost of food with the help of a garden in the countryside. The other, also very influential push factor, was the end of the centrally supported project to give access/ easy possibilities (with advantageous conditions) to the population to buy their own houses and flats. The pensioners with a parental house in the countryside could decide to give their urban apartment to their offspring, with the aim of helping them to establish a stable life. The illness and helplessness of old parents needing

care was also among the motivation of the return migration. The new economic situation also diminished the frequencies of the elderly moving to them in the town (this would have meant more changes in an already difficult situation). Beside these three motivations, there were two other less influential, but additional, factors: the feeling of uselessness after retirement (which could be compensated by work in the garden), and the feeling of responsibility in providing continuity to the inherited land and forest.

In sum, the analysed micro-region was partially institutionalised, so it has a population partially influenced by the process of the institutionalisation. A part of the inhabitants have a continuous, less or more traditional, dominantly agricultural life, meanwhile another part of the population was integrated in the institutional systems of the economy and social life, so their career bears the tracks of the process of the institutionalisation. The role of the different actors (the state, the local government, the family, the relatives, the neighbours, the local community) in different life stages, the division of responsibilities among them and the way these actors are intertwined depends highly on the framework the individual is integrated. The informal actors, like the family and the local network, are very adaptive to the formal structure. The more responsibilities are taken by the formal sector, the less is taken by the informal actors; the less the individual can profit from the institutionalised career, the more responsible the informal actors react. As the last stage of life is a very vulnerable period, the existence and the effects of the institutional background, or its lack, becomes significantly visible.

THE IMPACT OF THE FORMAL SECTOR: THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE OLD AGE

Social policy seems to have had an essential impact on the fragmentation of the life-course. The differentiation of the flow of life into different stages, from an economic point of view and the social responsibility of the institutions defined by the elites resulted in the conception of a formally structured life-course.

Among the multiple services offered to the elderly by the state and non-governmental actors (e.g., nursing homes, care work, hospital residence, daily care, clubs, financial aid to pay the bills and to buy medicines, etc.) the most important element of the elderly policy is the pension system. The history of introducing and forming the pension system in Romania as a category (stage of life, and pension as a source of money) shows three major phases: the period of charity (pity and piety), the period of social solidarity (right to have pension), and the period of self-management (the so called *pay-as-you-go* system).

From the point of view of the analysed population, the formation of the social system from the middle of the 20th century has relevance. At that time, the meaning of the pension changed radically: it moved from *alms* to *right*. An important step in

the formation of a centralized and highly institutionalized system was a 1949 law which ordered the formation of national social assistance – this also meant the nationalization of the private sector in the social security system (Mărginean, 1999: 181–198). The welfare state was formed and extended under socialism. Two tendencies characterized the social policy of these decades: on the one hand, the multiplexity of the system diminished and social assistance was mainly limited to pensions, while on the other hand, services were extended to the whole population. These changes resulted in a lower level of assurance, yet one accessible to all citizens. From our point of view, the most important change is the extension of the system and, furthermore, the elaboration and formalisation of the pension system. These caused a strong and stable codification of retirement. As the conditions of this entitlement were not connected to the capacity for work (unlike the traditional concept, where the different stages of the life-course are strongly related to the participation in work) but to a centrally fixed – and inflexible, impersonal – age, the category of old age was also formally constructed. In this process, the very personal age was pushed to an abstract level, it was generalized and formalized, moreover, it gained its core meanings from macro-level structures. To put this interpretation into a legal context I mention the most important laws of this period: in 1966, the agricultural workers (who constituted a huge portion of the population) were also integrated into the pension system; and in 1977, the agricultural workers from the non-cooperative regions were also integrated into the system (Rădulescu, 1996; Preoteasa et al., 1967; Țiclea and Tufan, 1994; Mărginean, 1999: 181–198). In brief: the pension system was based on social solidarity, it became a general right, the meaning of the pension was the reimbursement of the active period, and the system was firmly centralized, controlled by one single institution from the macro-level.

The revolution in 1989 caused many changes in the social and economic life of Romania. The first big impact on the pension system and on the institutionalization of the life-course was the economic collapse. The government tried to minimize the problem of unemployment by introducing an anticipatory pension allowing people to retire five years before the threshold of the old-age pension. This caused a huge rise in the proportion of pensioners¹. The second very important change in the pension system was its decentralization: in the 2000s, the legislators have made steps toward the invention of a private (facultative and obligatory) pension pillar (Law 411/2004, Law 204/2006, Law 23/2007). So, the system lost its general and generalizing character, as the content, the conditions and the codes of the legislation have been changed many times; moreover, a huge portion of the citizens remained out of the system due to the high level of unemployment. This seems to evoke a change also in the meaning of the pension and old age: the idea of social solidarity is changing, and the problem of old age is going to be an individual problem.

¹ The dynamism of the augmentation was: 1990 = 100%, 1991 = 122.6%, 1992 = 127.8%, 1993 = 127.2%, 1994 = 133.4%, 1995 = 138%. Prisăcaru, 1996: 27; see more Teșliuc et al., 2001: 71–91.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE INFORMAL SECTOR: THE LOCAL SOCIAL NETWORK AS CARE SYSTEM

The informal network is very sensitive to the personal demands and to the other factors of the social security system. It seems to be the basic element of the security system for the whole population in the investigated community, but it has different relevance for those who are mainly based on it and for those who are just partially based on it.

In the last stage of life, the spouse has the most important role in the care work. Those who live in couple have the chance to guard the quality of life and to prevent the decline for longer than those who live alone. They are the less vulnerable in all senses: morally, socially and materially, too. If there is a bigger difference of age between the spouses it may happen that the wife (more rarely the husband) undertakes the care work alone.

According to the local tradition, the care work is the task of the offspring. In the local norms, the children are the most responsible for the parents. The concept and nature of the family ties, the tiring work of childcare full of serious sacrifices undertaken by the parents previously, and the future inheritance from the parents form the background of this norm. But there are important differences between the ways the families put in practice this norm. The ideal form of the elderly care is considered to be the permanent presence of the offspring, namely the cohabitation. The stem family offers constant attention and help by the family members, it prevents many problems and moderates the vulnerability of the ageing parent. In those cases when the parent doesn't live together with one of the children, but there is at least one child remained in the village the relationship between them is very similar. The communication and the cooperation is not so intensive, but intensive enough to be present in problematic situations and to offer solutions whenever it is needed. Before the intervention of the industrialisation and the reorganization of the Romanian labour market structure, the dominant family types were the stem and nuclear families². Later, the emigration touched dramatically the micro-region. This resulted in the dominance of the nuclear family. The new phenomenon meant a special problem for the elderly: the gradual passage from independence to care offered by the offspring met difficulties.

The neighbours and the relatives have also an important role as informal social security components. According to the local customs, they don't undertake the care work in its complexity, they rather offer different forms of help. However, their presence in the everyday life, their attentiveness, their smaller and bigger helps are essentially important for the elderly to protect their life quality and to slow down the progress of decline. So, the non-family members don't afford elderly care, but complete the system.

² Both the Hungarian and the Romanian ethnographic atlases give data about this. Barabás, 1992; Ghinoiu, 2003.

There is one more relevant strategy applied in later life, in order to get care. Some childless elderly asks a relative or a trustworthy person to undertake the care work. In the micro-region this person is named *inheritor*. The relationship between them is more or less legally regulated. They may sign a contract in which they clearly fix the tasks of care, the properties offered for the care work and the conditions of the inheritance. But they also may adopt the *inheritor* which means a more familiar connection. In these cases, the relationship is regulated mostly by the unwritten laws and the local customs. As the *inheritor* and the elderly form cohabitation, the care work realised in this formation is very similar (even if not as satisfactory) to that one of the stem families.

In sum, the components of the informal sector and their intervention in the life of the elderly depend mostly on concrete situations of the everyday life and the problems directly and strongly related to the necessities experienced in the life of the elderly. This means that the background mechanism of the informal sector has its roots in the inside of the ageing process; this form of social security is highly related to the affected population and the inherent problems. As the everyday situations and the difficulties are interpreted in the context of the local cultural understandings, the informal sector leads to a very different formalisation of the later life than it happens on the macro-level. The components of the informal social security react in a very sensitive way to the individual progresses, according to the local cultural norms and interpretations, which means opportunity to a more gradual and flexible advance in the flow of the life.

THE COEXISTENCE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL AND CULTURAL CONCEPTS IN THE LOCAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF OLD AGE

In the investigated micro-region, two elderly groups live in the same society. They arrived in different ways at this stage of life, and they live this period differently.

Those who participated in the migration and return migration process have a fragmented life. According to the dynamism of the labour market and the social security system, their life is composed of three clearly divided periods: in the preparatory stage, they were living with the family of origin and were integrated in the education system; to create their own life, they left the micro-region, founded a family and fulfilled a professional career outside the homeland; and finally, after retirement, they returned and are now spending their inactive period in the village of origin. The three major stages of the life-course, i.e. childhood, adulthood and old age, are closely related with the mobility process. This connection results in a strong association – moreover an overlap – between the pension system, return mobility and the elderly.

G.E. was born in Cădărești in 1936. He began school in his home village, and continued in Frumoasa and Târgu Mureș. He married a girl from Coșnea in

1960, and they moved to Onești. “*We, who went to school in the 1950s, left here, and we went to towns, we worked there, we got apartments, we spent many years there. [...] At that time, it was a general opinion that without school one was worth nothing. And it was quite right. And then the youth left, a part of them*”³. He was working in a school as a craft teacher, his wife in a factory. They brought up three children, all of whom live in Onești. G. E. and his wife decided to come home after their retirement. They had two motivations: the financial advantages of rural life and homesickness: “*I was always so much linked to the land. I never wished to go to America, or I don’t know where. [...] I came back because I want my bones to rot here. I will not go anyway. I don’t have to be convinced to remain here. [...] I like to be here*”⁴. This beautiful narrative on homesickness seems to have very ideological aspects. This can be unmasked, on the one hand, by his life career: he spent an essential part of his life elsewhere, the active period, that stage of life when he accomplished very important things in his life; and, on the other hand, by his opinion about what is best for his children: “*We have three children, they are spread throughout the country. They just phone us, they ask how we are. They help – if it is needed. But otherwise, they have their own problems. I can’t take them home. And they wouldn’t come, because I got them to study, to go to university, to not come home to the village and mow. Why would they come? [...] They were brought up in the town, they were studying their whole life to become somebody, to be well prepared experts. So it is not worthwhile to come and mow and cut the trees*”⁵. However, the affection and attachment to the homeland became important in his life-course at the stage when he had already fulfilled the important expectations of the life (career, family), and when he needed to legitimize his return in the village.

Those who have passed their life in the village of origin have a life without clear and strong “borderlines”, since the transitions from one stage to another

³ The original text: „Mű, akik az 50-es évekbe iskoláztatva vótunk, azok kirepültünk innet, és mentünk a városra, ott dógoztunk, s lakást kaptunk, sok esztendőjig ott vótunk. [...] Akkó vót egy olyan általános felfogás, hogy iskola nélkül nem értékelődik az ember. S az elég helyes vót. S akkó a fiatalok el is mentek, egy része.”

⁴ The original text: „Én valahogy olyan földhöz kötöttnék éreztem magamat mindig, s most is. Én nem kívánkoztam elmenni Amerikába, s Isten tudja hova. [...] Én azért, hogy nekem a csontjaim itt rothadjanak e Csügésbe. Én innen nem mejek e. Engemet nem ke meggyőzzenek, hogy maradjak helybe. [...] Én itt szeretem.”

⁵ The original text: „Nekünk es van három gyerekünk, szét vannak szórva az országba. Csak telefonálnak, érdeklődnek, hogy hogy vagyunk. Segítnek – ha szükség van. De másképpen megvan az ő problémájuk. Én nem hozhatom őket haza. És nem is jönnének, me tanítottam, hogy csinájának egyetemet, hogy ne jöjjenek haza falura, s kaszálni. Há mé jöjjön? [...] Ők városon nőttek fel, ők egy életen keresztül tanultak, hogy ember legyen, s felkészült szakember legyen. S akkor nem érdemes, hogy jöjjön, s kaszáljon, s vágja a fát”.

happened gradually. Neither their professional status, nor their activity changed. They were agricultural workers and peasants, and they worked on the field in the active and in the later period, too. They were independent, they were not involved in the structure of the labour market. Thus, they did not retire in the same sense as the other group, they had no retirement ‘event’ and they did not have to change the activity of everyday life.

Cs. T. was born in Cădărești in 1930. He attended the schools of the micro-region. He got married in 1974. He and his wife lived with his parents for eleven years, but after the birth of the fourth child their nuclear family became so numerous that they had to move away. He built a house. He was a forest worker, while his wife dealt with the domestic work, and both of them also worked on the lands they received when they got married. They sent their children to urban schools and helped them to establish their life there. In 1994 his wife died. Then he married another woman from a neighbouring village, Brusturoasa. They lived in Cădărești and Brusturoasa, working in agriculture. After ten years, they divorced. Now he lives with a woman from Comănești. He spends his time mostly in Cădărești; he has not given up agriculture, he just reduces the amount of work step by step. He rents out the lands from far-away, but he continues to work on that part of his inheritance, that is close to his house, in spite of his age.

F. R. was born in Pajiștea in 1933. She grew up in a recomposed family. Her father died in 1939 in the First World War I. Her mother got married in 1947 to a man who had two daughters. As a result of the new situation, she knew she would not receive her part of the family’s land after her mother. She had access only to the paternal land. She got married young, when she was 17 years old, to a man who was 20 years older than her. She didn’t want him, but the decision was taken by the parents and the brothers who preferred this man because he was very wealthy. The couple worked on the lands. She gave birth to five children. She is now a widow, and lives with a son and his family. The others left the village, and live in towns in the surrounding counties. She has one son who did not get married, and returned to the parental house some years ago after prowling around and remaining unemployed. He is an alcoholic like the other son who is at home. The safest place for her to have a dignified old age would be the family of her daughter who lives in Brașov, but she refuses this, she prefers to struggle in the countryside with a lot of hard work than to live in a block of flats: *“[How long were you in Brașov in the block of flats?] One month. I was bored. I was not accustomed to it, I couldn’t eat, and somehow that air was not good for me. [...] The elderly from the countryside cannot live in a block of flats. [...] They want me to move into their place. My son-in-law wanted to take me, but I didn’t go. No, because somehow no... I lose my appetite, I can’t eat. However he tried his best, he even made himself very busy in the kitchen.*

I have very good sons-in-law. But the good air is here! For me the air is more important”⁶.

A subgroup of this second category is formed by those who lived in the micro-region and were employees at least for some years during the active period. Even if they had a stable wage and a professional status, they never completely left the agricultural life and the local culture, so they are very close to those who remained in the village.

The conclusion of these phases is a very important point: the transition from adulthood to old age happened differently in these two groups, and this has an enormous impact on their construction and conception of old age and elderly. Those who worked in urban areas became old from one day to the next, according to an institutionalised logic and an inflexible mechanism. “[When is somebody considered to be old in this village?] For example I am now 58 years old, and I consider myself already old. [Why?] We feel that life has already passed from us, we are already in the last step. When you enter retirement, you don’t expect anything any more, only death”⁷.

Those who remained at home became old slowly according to the local cultural *scenario* that takes into account people’s own rhythms:

“[When does the third age begin?] It depends on one’s life-quality. For those who are weak, there the life is less. Where we live better, life goes better”⁸ (own rhythm).

“When the elderly age the youth do everything, and then, of course, they handle things. Not the old. Whether or not he would like to do it, he has no more strength for it”⁹ (the strength is the centre factor, the strength makes the difference).

(Conversation in group about the beginning of old age and the experiences related to it:) *“Friend, when I was 70 years old, I felt as if I were a girl! I could work!”¹⁰* (the ability to work is the line of demarcation).

⁶ The original text: „[R. néni menyit ideig volt Brassóban a blokkban?] Akkor egy hónapot. Én má untam. Nem vótam megszokva, s nem, nem tudtam enni se, s valahogy a levegő nem használt nekem. [...] A blokkba mán a falusi öregek nem bírják. [...] Akarnak vinni. A vejem akart vinni, de nem mentem. Nem, me valahogy nem... Elvesz az étvágyam, s nem tudok enni. Pedig úgy készített, úgy zörgette a konyhába az edényeket. Nagyon jó vejeim vannak. Itt a jó levegő! Nekem a levegő fontosabb.”

⁷ The original text: „[Hány éves kortól számít valaki öregnek itt a faluban?] Hát például én most vagyok 58 éves, és én má öregnek mondom magamat. [Miért?] Ugy érezzük, hogy töllünk etelt az élet, mosmár az utósó lépésbe estünk belé. Mikor a nyugdíjba beléestél, már nem vársz semmit, csak a halált.”

⁸ The original text: „[Mikortól kezdődik az öregkor?] Melyknek milyen az életsorsa. Hol gyenge, ott kevesebb az élet. Ahol jobban élünk, jobb az élet, még jobban mejen.”

⁹ The original text: „Amikó az öregek előregednek, a fiatalok csinálnak mindent, s akkó persze ók ke irányítsák a dógokat. Nem az öreg. Az hiába is akarná, nincsen má erő hozzá”.

¹⁰ The original text: „Komaasszony, mikó én hetven éves vótam, úgy éreztem magamat, mintha lány lettem vóna! Dógozni tudtam!”

“It begins from 70, that you feel it... So, what did I feel at the very beginning? Not yet then that I couldn’t work! At that time I still could work well. My husband told me – God bless him – what hurts me is that you have to arrange everything. Don’t worry about that, I said, why does this hurt you? I can do it. If I couldn’t do it, I wouldn’t. But he observed that I got tired, I perspired, I got tired easily, I had to go to have a rest”¹¹ (the loss of strength signals the beginning of ageing).

The interpretation of the transition and the feelings related to it influence the meanings connected to the years ahead. On the one hand, we confront the feeling of an *early, forced* push from active life to retirement, which can be accompanied by a feeling of shifts between the institutionalised life-course and the personal one, so these emotions may lead to negative and confused attitudes toward old age. On the other hand, where the transition from one life stage to another is gradual, and follows personal needs, old age is much better accepted, and it has the meaning of a *natural, normal* stage of life.

Life in old age is also different for these groups. One group became old quickly, without having a chance to make the process fit his/her own rhythm and without having time to get ready, whereas the others became old slowly without dramatic and unexpected changes. This has two effects: on the one hand, the sentimental problems caused by the transition centre on the identity formed in the new situation, in the new social status (inactive), on the other hand, the transition may cause difficulties in the restructuring of everyday life. Those who went through a quick process have disadvantages in both aspects, in comparison with those who had time to prepare and restructure their life according to the flow of the years.

For example, the problem of uselessness, the feeling of being unnecessary could appear: *“I came home mostly because I don’t like to sit in vain. I have to do something. While I was going to work, I was occupied. [...] But if you retire, you don’t have that, you are at home every moment. And I can’t sit in vain, I have to move, I have to work”¹².*

Life without a line of demarcation goes on continuously: *“They left, and the two of us remained here. My old man died, but I didn’t go to stay with anyone. Where would I go? I don’t want to be a burden for anyone. [But the*

¹¹ The original text: „Hetventől kezdődik, hogy megérz... Na én legeslegelőre mit éreztem meg? Akkó se, hogy na én nem tudnék dőgozni! Még akkó jó győztem. Mondta a férjem – a Jóisten nyugtassa –, az fáj nekem, hogy mindent te ke intézzé. Hát ne fájjon, mondom, mét fáj?! Hát tudom, ha nem tudnám, nem intézném. Na, de hát ő mán látta, hogy fáradok ki, izzadok, könnyen fáradok, jött, hogy pihenjek le”.

¹² The original text: “Én most azért jöttem haza előre is, én szeretek hiába ülni. Nekem kell dőgozzak valamit. Míg munkába jártam le vótam foglalva. [...] De ha nyugdíjba mész, ez nincs meg, minden percen otthon vagy. S én nem tudok hiába ülni, nekem kell mozogjak, nekem kell dőgozzak”.

children don't take you sometimes?] I go to them, but at home I have chickens, I have a calf. I am quite old, I shouldn't do this. They tell me enough, don't work so much, don't struggle so much. Because I am also sickly, I am 82 already. But I still milk the cows, and I do my work. [...] I push it as hard as possible"¹³. The changes are gradual: see also the case of Cs. T. above presented.

Concerning life in old age, I mention secondly the differences between the models of lifestyle that these two groups follow: urban versus rural, intellectuals and workers (white collar and blue collar) versus agricultural workers. There are slightly detached and slightly intertwined worlds, in the same cultural and social frame. The differences are at the level of the everyday strategies, and also at the level of the contents, because these worlds are hierarchical – the agricultural and rural lifestyle seems to be on the bottom, while the urban and intellectual models are on the top, and they are to be followed.

On the superiority of those who left the agriculture, there is consensus: *"Then the easier life came in. Ceaușescu built a lot of factories, the youth got the chance to work. They were gentlemen. The meadow, the houses and the granaries remained empty. The people left"*¹⁴ – said a man who spent his life in the micro-region. *"[And those who remained here, what motivated them to remain at home?]* That they failed to get an education. They were already older or their mental capacities were not enough to get a theoretical preparation for a job"¹⁵ – said a man who worked in a town.

So those who returned from the towns try to follow the urban life models in many forms: some keep hold of their own apartment, some are still registered with an urban doctor, some retain the urban residence on their official papers to maintain a sentimental attachment, some prefer to spend some weeks in wintertime in the town, in general, their village houses are equipped in an urban style, they preserve many elements of the urban life rhythm, etc. In sum: *"We belong there"*¹⁶.

¹³ The original text: „Odamentek, s itt maradtunk ketten. Az öreg meghalt, én nem mentem egyhez se. Kinek izére menjek? Én úgy szeretem, hogy ne menjek senkinek a nyakára. [De nem szokták elvinni Mari nénit időnként?] Hát menyek én, de itthon van majorságom, bornyúm van. Ugye, elég öreg vagyok, mán nem kéne. Mondják eleget, hogy ne dőgozzon annyit, ne kínlódjon annyit. Me beteges vagyok, má 82 éves. De még fejek, s végzem a dógom. [...] Taszigálom, ahogy lehet”.

¹⁴ The original text: „Akkó, ugye, a könnyebb élet bėjött. A sok gyárat Ceaușescu megépítette, a fiatalságnak munkalehetőséget adott. Üriemberek vótak. Ott a kaszálók, a házak, s a csürök üresen maradtak. A nép ement”.

¹⁵ The original text: “Má idősebbek vótak vagy pedig szellemi képességük nem vót olyan, hogy valamilyen foglalkozásról elméleti felkészültséget kapjanak”.

¹⁶ In original text: „Mü odatartunk”.

Differences between careers also significantly influence the elderly period. Those who were integrated into the labour market have a higher pension than those who remained in agriculture. This inequality results in different life-styles. While those who were integrated in the labour market get an adequate sum of money in the form of a pension, and so can have a quite comfortable old age, those who remained in agriculture have very limited financial resources, so – alongside the traditional work moral – they are also constrained to supplement their incomes with agricultural products. Moreover, the lack of financial resources has a huge impact on conserving an earlier life model and strategy: the poor preserve their objects, and the mental world related to them. The poverty reproduces an earlier type of world.

Lastly I mention the differences between the reconceptualisations of life from the retrospective perspective and the thoughts about the essence of old age in this interpretative context. Those whose life was fragmented in inactive-active-inactive stages, can feel the fulfilment of their activity, because their professional career came to an end, they completed the professional tasks of their life. From this point of view, the period of retirement has the meaning of ‘well-deserved rest’. Even if they have many occupations during their old age, like working in the garden or maybe also on the field, they don’t consider these to be part of their life-tasks, these occupations are only additional activities. On the other side, for those who work continuously in agriculture, old age and the feeling of completion do not coincide. They work continuously on the field and in the garden while they have physical strength. This is the major task of their activity and it is completed only at the end of the life.

CONCLUSION

The institutionalisation of old age is an important achievement of the 20th century. During the socialist decades, the pension system was extended to the whole population, the impact of institutional categories became very strong, however it couldn’t influence the mentality of the whole population. Those who were integrated into the labour market and those who remained out of it had differently composed life-courses, and so these groups experience different types of ageing. The varying level of integration into the institutional system leads to different situations and problems occurring in the later life periods. One group follows the institutional scenario: they become old when they retire, suffer from the rapid restructuring of everyday life, struggle with the feeling of not being needed and with identity problems, but have the feeling of fulfilling the tasks set by life. For them, old age means a ‘well-deserved rest’, and due to the higher level of pension they also have an easier life, as compared to their peers. Others follow the cultural scenario: they become old slowly according to their own rhythm, they

could reorganize their life step by step, their identity of *being middle aged* changes gradually to that of *being old*, but they never have the reassuring feeling of fulfilling the tasks set for them. In addition, due to very low pensions, they reproduce earlier life-strategies without having the possibility to change them, to choose among alternatives.

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Articolul prezintă construcția vârstei a III-a, din perspectiva persoanelor în vârstă. La nivel macro, segmentările cursului vieții și înțelesurile legate de anumite stadii ale vieții sunt dominate de influența procesului instituționalizării. Sectorul formal al sistemului de securitate socială codifică viața în stadiul său târziu după principii impersonale, controlate de la nivel central și definite structural. Categoria culturală a vârstei a III-a este formată la nivel micro, iar rădăcinile sale se află majoritar în cadrul mecanismului intern al îmbătrânirii și în înțelegerea dinăuntru a populației vârstnice. Articolul prezintă rezultatele unui studio antropologic realizat în România. Deosebiri semnificative par să existe între populația ce se îndeletnicește cu agricultura și populația urbană (non-agricolă). Articolul arată complexitatea vârstei a III-a: analiza prezintă principiile diferitelor tipuri de construcție a anilor vârstnici, limitările lor și relația interactivă dintre ele.

Cuvinte-cheie: instituționalizarea vârstei a III-a, sistemul de pensii, sens cultural, îmbătrânire culturală.

Primit: 03.07.2013
Redactor: Raluca Popescu

Acceptat: 09.09.2013