

Technology, Life course and the Post-Industrial Landscape

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S. Katz, Technology, Life course, and the Post-Industrial Landscape. Gerontechnology 2003; 2(3):255-259 In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the profound changes in labour relations, social services, retirement and demographic patterns, the aging of Western populations, and the medical and cultural stretching of middle age into later life, have blurred the chronological and generational boundaries that had once set apart childhood, middle age, and old age. This paper explores some of the commercial, technological, cultural, and spatial consequences of the resulting post-industrial life course and its contradictory challenges to the aging process.

Keywords: life course, post-industrial, aging, the body, technology

Some years ago I was in Florida developing a research project on retired Canadians. One morning I came across a newspaper article on diapers; to be precise, Proctor & Gamble's new, extra-large size Pampers introduced to handle the untrained toilet habits of three year-old children who might weigh over thirty-five pounds¹. The diapers are a response to evidence that increasingly fewer children in the United States are out of diapers by the age of three; hence larger sized diapers are in demand. Both career-weary parents, who are continually advised by the experts to reduce the pressure they put on children to 'train', and their appreciative children, who apparently enjoy the freedom not to master one of the fundamental functions of life until they feel prepared to do so, are embracing the new product.

At a local level, this is just another story about another leak proof, disposable technological wonder-diaper that frees parents and children from facing anxious-making decisions. On a larger level, however, this is a story about technological expertise in a post-industrial society carving out of the

life course yet another commercial opportunity, and in so doing, fostering in children those attributes germane to their future lives as consuming, self-fashioning subjects. In particular, the move from with-diaper to without-diaper stages of maturation depends, in part, on the child's ability to speak about and choose the lifestyle commodities that best suit their personal development. Needless to say, early reports indicate that the diapers are a huge success and we can anticipate the consequences for future generations who were prematurely market-niched and comfort-zoned into consumer independence by being able to negotiate their own toilet training at the age of three. The irony is that by getting their children out of diapers later, parents may be pushing their children into adulthood earlier.

GERONTOLOGY OR LIFE STYLE MANAGEMENT

However, the diaper story not only illustrates that consumerism and marketing are shaping new notions of the life course, but also signals that newly popular and influential discourses on aging are emerging

around the central idea of lifestyle. In other words, professional gerontology is no longer the only authority on the problems and prospects of aging. Thus several important questions are raised here about the relationships between life course and lifestyle, identity and aging, and consumerism and technology. In particular, how is the post-industrial landscape producing a post-industrial life course moored to the power of the cultural sphere in late capitalist societies?

Traditionally, gerontologists and life course researchers despite their different approaches have faced a common problem, which is how to produce comprehensive models or narratives of life when the aging process has no single developmental logic. At whatever biological, cognitive, or social register one studies the life course; one finds more diversity than unity, more paradox than consistency, and more ambiguity than certainty. The multifarious realities of aging have been illustrated in cross-cultural studies of aging that tackle the plurality of life course models across the world's societies²⁻⁵ and in historical investigations of the rich and varied representations of the ages and stages of human existence through time⁶⁻⁸.

Social critics of Western modernity have also underscored the connection between the bureaucratic standardization of age-graded behaviours and identities, and the industrial segmentation of the life course into distinct age differences⁹⁻¹⁰. Indeed, what is accepted as the modern life course is closer to what Martin Kohli calls a 'life course regime'¹¹⁻¹²; that is, an administrative rationality that politicizes the temporalization of everyday life. Furthermore, the life course regimes typical of modern Western societies have been shaped according to white, masculine, heterosexual, middle-class values and cultural patterns. Hence, the critics point out as well that life course politics

constitute a critical arena of struggle whereby race, gender, sexual and class divisions intersect with those based on age.

LIFE COURSE CONCEPTS

Thus, it would appear that while aging is a universal phenomenon, its configuration in life courses is not, despite customary attempts by gerontologists to identify one with the other. On a macro-scale, life courses are aggregations of knowledges, structures, ethics and hierarchies through which the complexities of aging are refracted and socially organized. On a micro-scale, life courses are lived-out embodiments of time from which people distil a rich and versatile archive of meaning, memory, passion, and identity. Life courses span rather than separate macro and micro dimensions of aging, even where they emerge in tandem with bureaucratic or administrative authorities. As such they can be thought of as a 'folding' in the sense of term used by the late French philosopher Gilles Deleuze; that is, a dynamic shaping and pleating of subjective worlds as they interact with the external imperatives for living in time. In short, as foldings life courses are the 'inside of the outside', hence they are both uniquely individual and collectively sustained according to the cultural priorities of historical societies^{13,14}.

Thinking of life courses in the plural and as co-existing regimes and macro-micro foldings returns our thinking to the connection between life course, the post-industrial landscape and consumer society, a connection around which an interdisciplinary literature has recently blossomed in the humanities¹⁵⁻¹⁷, social sciences¹⁸⁻²⁰, and feminism²¹⁻²². Focussing their critique on the temporal, bodily and spatial manifestations of the post-industrial landscape, these authors and their associates analyze how these manifestations are folded into the everyday lives of aging individuals. Elsewhere I have also discussed this ques-

tion in relation to contemporary cultural promotions of timeless and ageless images of so-called 'positive' lifestyles and modes of aging²³⁻²⁴. In brief, the major feature of the post-industrial life course is its blurring and loosening of life-course identities around childhood, adulthood and old age from the rigidly chronological and biologically deterministic definitions of the past²⁵. Why now? Because the main features of post-industrialism, including the new labour and retirement structures, the importance of leisure and consumerism on a global scale, the medical, pharmacological, and commercial stretching of middle age into later life, and the improved health and increasing size of aging populations in Western society, have reconfigured typical life transitions into time-fuzzy 'uni-age,' 'flexi-retired' and 'life-long' age-identities. The real conditions of bodily aging are seen as challenges to be overcome rather than as limits to be passively accepted. Thus, the ideals of activity, independence, mobility, and experimentation in the twenty-first century have replaced the negative images of decline, poverty, disease, and obsolescence that preoccupied the social imagination about aging over the past two centuries.

CONTRADICTIONS

Obviously, there are very real contradictions engendered by these developments. Many older people are not the exemplars of senior citizenry idealized by the current imagery, and do face tremendous emotional and health problems that require sustainable social support, effective care solutions, and informed public sympathy. Marginality, unemployment, loneliness, and disability are also the consequences of post-industrial living. For instance, in Canada, although child poverty is promoted as the most prominent social issue, 20.8% of seniors aged 65 and older have relatively low incomes (with single women leading the group), which is only slightly less than the child poverty rate²⁶. As Western welfare states continue to

(neo)liberalize and privatize social services, diminish their budgets for universal social security programs and offload the responsibilities of public support onto local 'communities' and 'families,' older people who lack middle-class financial and cultural capital to secure successful, self-financed and self-caring lifestyles will face even greater struggles to meet social expectations.

A good example of these contradictions is the development of retirement communities and 'Sun Cities.' These spaces are akin to the touristic theme-parks and fast-food restaurants that are so pervasive in North America whereby 'every place can be anyplace in an essentially placeless world'²⁷. The retirement communities are often publicized as 'escapes,' 'villages,' 'havens' and 'parks' and constitute what Andrew Blaikie calls the 'landscapes of later life'¹⁹. In reality they tend to isolate aging groups and potentially mask the aging process itself by naturalizing retirement living as continuously active and problem-free²⁸⁻²⁹. Hence, new retirement developments can have the ironic effect of presenting agehood as an ageless and timeless experience, while separating it from the life course at the same time.

Another example is the reconceptualization of sexuality that has accompanied the popularity of sexual-dysfunction medications such as Viagra and related health promotion campaigns that link sexual 'fitness' to healthy aging. This post-industrial version of sexual vigour glosses over those cases where sexual dysfunction or impotence might actually be an effect of aging or disease, or caused by psychological or personal problems that require specialized care or long-term counseling. Thus, eternal (hetero)sexual functionality is yet another ageless, life-long ambition seemingly attainable through the technological, consumerist and lifestyle resources of post-industrial society³⁰⁻³¹. The widespread uses of cosmetic surgery, rejuvenation and

life-extension therapies, and 'boomer' fashion and recreation industries are other areas that similarly reduce the opportunities for living in time within a global diversity of life courses to a singular and a historical existence. As Zygmunt Bauman point outs, 'what counts ... is what is around here and now. 'Older' and 'younger' objects are all on the same plane, that of the present'³².

A LOOK IN THE FUTURE

When the children of today become the twenty-first century's first, fully post-industrial generation, then how will they age? What will become of memory, generation, tradition, biography, death and dying? What kinds of environments and technologies will they seek? How will they manage the contradictions between the dreams of post-industrial society, the politics of demography, and the realities of aging, which have been folded into their lives along with those extra-size diapers? These are certainly some of the questions that gerontologists and scholars of aging should be asking if we are to respond to the Council of Europe's call for a lifespan-oriented 'universal design' in a society-for-all.

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