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## **Positive Aging in an Age of Neo-liberalism**

### Old Wine in New Bottles?

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*Marvin Formosa*

The discourse of positive aging has become the central plank upon which international and national aging policies are constructed. Moreover, an increasing number of popular writers are advocating positive aging as a means to age actively, successively, and productively. These include authors of self-help books, media personalities, as well as writers from psychology and the social sciences (Lane; Devall). As Gilleard and Higgs (141) point out, rationales supporting positive aging convey a common message that later life is a time of opportunity and 'old age' a state to be resisted, whilst treating 'disengagement' from society or the marginalization of 'pensioned retirement' as a moral or personal failing. Such a stance is a sharp turn away from modern visions of aging policy, popular during the 1970s and 1980s, where older people were generally expected to embrace a passive lifestyle wholly dependent upon state welfare policy. One key problem, however, is that rationales advocating positive aging are generally embedded in a neo-liberal ideology that encourages individuals to become 'entrepreneurs of themselves,' behaving according to the ideal of economic markets, and choosing the optimal courses of action that maximize their interests. Positive aging thus overlooks how in capitalism the drive of human beings to self-develop tends to be captive to the ideological hegemony of the commoditization of culture. This argument is presented in four sections. Whilst the first part focuses on the genealogy and key tenets of positive aging, the second section presents some international policies advocating the goal of positive aging. The third section provides a constructive critique of positive aging, stressing its neo-liberal bias, and hence, its limitations as a social change program. The final part forwards recommendations that function to improve the democratic credentials of positive aging.

## THE GENEALOGY OF POSITIVE AGING

Positive aging represents a new model of aging policy that positions elders as potentially productive participants, and therefore, they are to be included in broader social agendas rather than be solely perceived as passive care recipients. This shift in perspective occurred as the result of a profound restructuring of social life that operates at both a global level and at the level of what has been described as the institutionalized life course. In Bauman's words,

[society] is being transformed by the passage from the 'solid' to the 'liquid' phases of modernity, in which all social forms melt faster than new ones can be cast [...] their allegedly short life-expectation undermines efforts to develop a strategy that would require the consistent fulfillment of a 'life-project.' (Bauman 303)

Such transformations have a profound impact on retirement and later life. In the past, the aging self was based on occupational biographies and incumbents' relationships to the welfare state. However, in contemporary times "the old have moved into a new 'zone of indeterminacy,' so that growing old is itself becoming a more social, reflexive, and managed process, notably in the relationship between the individual, the state, and a range of public as well as private services" (Phillipson and Powell 22). It was precisely to protect older people from the possible risks emanating from the coming of global capitalist economies as well as the shift of state welfare to the privatization of services, that governments and non-governmental organizations began advocating for aging policies to be based on the tenets of positive aging. Positive aging refers to the following:

[...] a new vision of ageing [...] that accepts the realities of a fundamental genetically driven bio-molecular process leading to death, but with the prospect of achieving healthy, active, productive, successful and positive ageing to the very end through lifestyle modification and interventions that work. (Andrews 1)

The discourse surrounding positive aging challenges assumptions about later life as a period of inevitable decline and focuses on the modifiable effects of lifestyle, attitude, skills, and technologies (Davey and Glasgow). It harbors a rejection of the assumption that adjustment to 'old age' is best

achieved through a mutual withdrawal of individual and society, and instead, underlines the need to remain actively engaged in society in order to adapt successfully to older age. Although a number of terms are being used to describe this 'new' approach to aging, the notions of active aging, successful aging, and productive aging are dominant and widespread. The World Health Organization advocates a multi-dimensional definition of "active ageing" as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age" (12). Active aging thus refers to continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual, and civic affairs, rather than just the ability to be physically active or to participate in the labor force. In Rowe and Kahn's influential work, 'successful aging' is defined as including three main components: low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life. However, successful aging is more than the absence of disease, it is their combination with active engagement with life that represents the concept most fully. Finally, "productive ageing" refers to any activity "that contributes to producing goods and services or develops the capacity to produce them" (Caro et al. 6). Such activities "are social valued in the sense that, if one individual or group did not perform them, there would be a demand for them to be performed by another individual or group" (Bass and Caro 37). Productive aging, therefore, includes paid employment, unpaid volunteer work, family care, but excludes enriching activities such as physical exercise, spiritual encounters, and learning for personal growth. The next section demonstrates how such ideas guide and inform national policies on aging.

## **POLICY FRAMEWORKS**

Rationales celebrating positive aging have been highly attractive in policy circles as they draw inspiration from radical streams in gerontology as well as the age movement itself (Biggs 97). To governments, positive aging suggests a means of countering negative stereotyping of aging and promising the possibility of being critical of such stereotypes of decline, whilst still conforming to wider values in society. The policy discourse of positive aging generally includes the need for older individuals to be responsible for the outcomes of their life choices (particularly in relation to health and

income), the necessity for communities to provide the social support required for individuals to make better choices over their life-course, and the urgency for governments to provide the infrastructure for both individuals and communities to give 'life' to these better choices (Asquith 256). Indeed, a concluding statement submitted to the United Nations Second World Assembly on Ageing reads:

A new vision of ageing was proposed that accepts the realities of a fundamental genetically driven bio-molecular process leading to death, but with the prospect of achieving healthy, active, productive, successful and positive ageing to the very end through lifestyle modification and interventions that work. (Andrews 1)

Rationales in favor of positive aging have also made significant in-roads in the European Union where it was stated:

The EU approach to ageing aims at mobilising the full potential of people of all ages [...]. This results in an orientation towards *active ageing policies and practices*. Core active ageing practices include lifelong learning, working longer, retiring later and more gradually, being active after retirement and engaging in capacity enhancing and health sustaining activities. (European Community 5-6; bold in original)

The New Labour government in the United Kingdom (1997-2010) has been particularly enthusiastic in its redefinition of adult aging (Biggs 100). One consolidating document states that "unless we encourage older people to remain actively engaged in socially valued activity, whether paid or unpaid, everybody in Britain will miss out on the benefits of their experience and social commitment" (Cabinet Office 1). Four key areas were identified for change namely to raise the expectations of older people and stop making judgments based on their age rather than their 'true value.' They wanted to encourage people aged 50 or older to stay in the work force, reverse incentives to retire early, and increase volunteering among older people. More recently, the policy paper *Opportunity Age* sought a 'new view' of aging as an "extension of opportunities for individuals and society" (HM Government 3). It explicitly stated the following:

[In] the years after 50 we all want three main things: the opportunity to continue our career, or the choice of starting a new one that better suits our family circum-

stances, to play a full and active role in society, with an adequate income and decent housing; and later to keep independence and control over our lives as we grow older, even if we are constrained by the health problems that sometimes affect the final years. (HM Government 3)

On the other side of the Atlantic, Canada set up a public committee to review public programs and services for seniors, to identify the gaps that exist in meeting the needs of the country's aging population, and as a result, make recommendations for service delivery in the future. Highlighting how difficult it is to talk about aging in a positive way in a society, capitalist countries are assailed with advertising which promises eternal youth. It was argued that

[m]indsets have to be changed if we are to go beyond our obsession with defying aging and youth-oriented society [...]. Social attitudes and marketing practices that are based on ageism create demographic silos where age groupings are pitted against each other in the workplace, in health care and in the media. This situation must change. (Special Senate Committee on Ageing 14)

On the basis of the abovementioned recommendations, positive aging made strong inroads in Canadian provinces. The *Nova Scotia Strategy for Positive Aging* (Seniors' Secretariat) emphasizes how aging is both a personal and a societal issue. It highlights the urgent need for policy statements that focus on promoting individual responsibility such as improving lifestyle choices that influence positive aging, while also addressing the broader role that families and communities play in ensuring seniors receive the support they need to age positively. Accordingly, the strategy stipulates nine key goals for positive aging, namely celebrating seniors, financial security, health and well-being, maximizing independence, housing options, transportation, respecting diversity, employment, life transitions, and supportive communities.

In Australasia, New Zealand launched a *Positive Aging Strategy* in 2001 with the objectives to improve opportunities for older people to participate in the community in whatever way they choose (Ministry of Social Development, *Positive ageing indicators report*). It was stated that such a goal will be achieved through identifying barriers to participation and working with all sectors to develop actions to address these and other difficulties, while balancing the needs of older people with the needs of younger and future

generations. The New Zealand government highlighted that the *Positive Aging Strategy* is directed by ten key goals:

1. empowering older people,
2. providing opportunities for older people to participate in and contribute to family and community,
3. reflecting positive attitudes to older people,
4. recognizing the diversity of older people,
5. affirming the values and strengthen the capabilities of older Maori,
6. recognising the diversity and strengthen the capabilities of older Pacific people,
7. appreciating the diversity of cultural identity of older people,
8. recognising the different issues facing men and women,
9. ensuring older people, in both rural and urban areas, live with confidence in a secure and service-oriented environment, and
10. enabling older people to take responsibility for their personal growth and development.

(Ministry of Social Development, *New Zealand Aging Positive Strategy* 1)

## A CRITICAL INTERLUDE

Rationales advocating positive aging constitute a breath of fresh air since, in place of disengagement and structured dependency perspectives, they highlight how retirement now offers the opportunity to develop a distinct and personally fulfilling lifestyle. However, policies overlook that later life does not arise in a social vacuum. Similar to younger peers, older people are living their lives in late modern societies which operate according to the socio-economic and political principles of neo-liberalism. Although Marxism has gone out of fashion, many theorists are noting how record levels of human agency have led to the fading of social inequalities, however, the truth could not be more opposite. As Mayo affirms, current societies are still characterized by a “scenario of mass impoverishment in various parts of the world [...] besides the persistence of structures of oppression in terms of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability” (42). Research finds that the experience of older people is far from that of flying freely into space free of the fetters of structural inequalities (Formosa 17). Suf-



face to say here that as much as 19 percent of the people in the European Union (16 million) are living at the risk of poverty (Zaidi 1). One feature of retirement in late modernity is the growth of new inequalities alongside the continuation of traditional social divisions. Far from class, gender, and other types of inequality becoming less important, it is more a question of social division becoming redefined and experienced in different ways to earlier periods. In this respect, one finds two key lacunae in the planning and practice of positive aging.

## ECONOMIC BIAS

Despite the emphasis on participation and holistic routes to well-being in later life, policy instruments and funding opportunities are biased in favor of increasing the number of older persons in employment. Unfortunately, the notion of productive aging has taken precedence over the concepts of active aging and successful aging. As Walker highlights, this may be due to a limited understanding of the concept of active aging beyond its application to the labor market. For example, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, active aging is "the capacity of people as they grow older to lead productive lives in the society and economy" (29). At the same time, the prevailing concept of successful aging is highly idealistic and strongly North American culture-bound, so that it fails to locate much empathy and affinity in a cross-cultural scenario. Although policy directives that provide older workers a better chance of continuing work beyond statutory retirement age are highly warranted today. The productive aging approach has been criticized for an overemphasis on economic activity that fails to incorporate notions such as work/life balance and the societal benefits of recreational, creative, and spiritual pursuits (Formosa 2). The overall emphasis on workforce participation detracts from a holistic approach to wellbeing and limits the visibility of those who by choice or circumstance are no longer active workers or volunteers. Writing from an Australian perspective, Asquith claims that governments demanding from individuals to continue working to assist future generations

is a breach of the social contract in place for 100 years. While some older Australians may want to continue working, these are often workers who have jobs

that they enjoy and can continue doing beyond the age of 65. For manual workers, who have literally put their bodies on the line for Australian economic security, the promotion of additional working years contradicts the first component of positive ageing - healthy ageing. (Asquith 263)

Indeed, positive aging is unashamedly economic, and uses 'efficiency' as its main argument. Other evidence constitutes the EU's extensive drive to improve the e-learning skills of older people. Although this is not in itself wrong, one has to query the EU's strong interest in meeting the needs of the dominant service industries and the relative neglect of the whole range of abilities needed by the extensive assortment of productive sectors. As Borg and Mayo underline, "private and public interests, concerns and agendas are slowly becoming one" (213). As such, positive aging is characterized by a liberal avoidance of purpose, where older adults find personal value through becoming a pool of surplus value although it is an economic justification, rather than an ideological justification because the claims of productivity is absent (Cole 440). Indeed, positive aging falls short of challenging the contemporary economic dynamic. This is a social inclusion based only on the terms of work and work-like activities and is a position that appears limited when compared to alternative possibilities for an aging identity, as has been identified through gerotranscendence and the mature imagination (Biggs 110). Furthermore, it is questionable to what extent productive aging is compatible with the lives, needs, and interests of older women. As Holstein noted, "since an older woman's market value and contribution to the system of economic productivity is already negligible, she can be further devalued if participation in that work culture becomes the new and valued norm for old age" (23). Of course, this is not the same as saying that positive aging should shift its focus to the activity and successful aging rationales as both positions include various limitations. Activity theorists are criticized for their narrow focus on individual adaptation and satisfaction to the neglect of larger structural issues and differences, with cultural critics pointing to the kinship between positive activity models of aging and consumerist ideologies (Katz, *Busy Bodies* 140). As Moody claims, active aging celebrates the 'frenzy of activity' whilst masking the need for meaning. On the other hand, the focus of successful aging in creating healthier older people must shift to healthier lifestyles in childhood and adulthood, since "waiting for the arbitrary chronological marker of 65 is the equivalent to closing the stable door after the horse has

bolted" (Asquith 262). Moreover, successful aging divides the population as 'welderly' and 'illderly,' whilst giving the wrong impression that aging is a manageable problem (Estes et al. 70).

## AGENTIC BIAS

Positive aging also fails to acknowledge the structural limitations that older people face in everyday life (Davey and Glasgow). Its emphasis on independence and activity functions to underplay the experience of people who for various reasons cannot age positively. Critics argue that the discourse of positive aging fails to acknowledge the limitations and difficulties that many older people face, and as a result allows society to avoid thinking about and creating a respected place for elderly people in society (Katz, *Busy Bodies* 145). Whilst there is no doubt as to the strong arguments present in social constructionist theories of the life course, it remains to say that "social constructions of old age have real consequences for those so defined" (Calasanti and Slevin 17). Indeed, the positive discourse on aging presents an image of active and healthy older age that for some may not be achievable. As Davey and Glasgow claim, the positive aging discourse portrays older people as able to counteract the effects of aging through personal effort. One can never underestimate the extent to which older adults inhabit a life-world typified by unique structural inequalities that limit their potential to age positively. Although all aging people experience some level of ageism and age discrimination, there are some sectors whose lives are characterized by other lifelong 'otherisms' as a result of which they experience even more intense levels of social exclusion. Research highlights a strong positive relationship between class and quality of life, with older people in working-class positions generally holding relatively lower levels of financial, social, physical and cultural capital – all of which hinder their success in aging actively, successfully, and productively (Formosa 141). The same can be said with respect to women and members of ethnic minorities whose life course is characterized by sparse opportunities compared to male and white peers respectively, so that they generally underperform in terms of socio-economic resources, bridging forms of social capital, and health status, whilst experiencing double and triple jeopardies of age, sex, and race discrimination (Formosa). Positive aging, in this sense, is geared towards "middle-class whites with sizable pensions and large automo-

biles...marked by 'compulsive tidy loafs' and populated by 'tanned' golfers'[...] attained only by men whose race and class make them most likely to afford it" (Calasanti 202).

Furthermore, positive aging appears insensitive to the vulnerable and frail status of older people who are experiencing physical and cognitive difficulties. As Opie (cited in Davey and Glasgow 25) states, positive aging renders the aging body invisible, hence, relying on "the very negatives which it ostensibly and ostentatiously denounces" (Davey and Glasgow 25). Similarly, Katz points out that positive aging does not make us deal well with issues of decline and death, both of which are highly integral to the aging transition (*Disciplining* 22). Positive aging is, therefore, guilty of age-denial. It focuses its energy and efforts on celebrating and propagating the so-called 'third-age lifestyle,' and in doing so, promotes its ethos at the expense of older and more defenseless people, namely those in the fourth age. As Karpf underlines,

Sustaining this age-denial is magic thinking that with enough Sudoku and personal training you'll manage to bypass the fourth age altogether. By creating a new stereotype out of the mobile, healthy and affluent, you demonise the immobile, sick and poor. You also foment the belief that, through discipline and self-control, the body can always be transcended. It can't. (1)

## RENEWING POSITIVE AGING

There is an urgent need for policy documents to provide an improved infrastructure for both individuals and communities to age positively. It is important that rationales advocating positive aging adopt a realistic approach, namely one that does not blame the individual for unsuccessful or negative aging experiences. The following broad recommendations emerge from the discussion herein in hope of strengthening and furthering the democratic credentials of positive aging policy.

*Transformational agenda.* Policies that act as catalysts for higher levels of positive aging should be directed to aid older people gain power over their lives. Positive aging must not be viewed as an end in itself, but as a vehicle for retraining or adjusting to technological change, improving strategies of self-fulfillment and a sense of purpose, and above all, a catalyst for individual and social empowerment. In sum, positive aging must arise as po-

tential counter-hegemony to the current political scenario marked by neo-liberalism and the effect that this ideology has on daily living in later life.

*Social inclusion.* Positive aging must adopt a 'widening participation' agenda. Policy makers must think out of the box so that initiatives promoting active/successful/productive aging attract older adults with working class backgrounds, older men, ethnic minorities, and frail and vulnerable elders. There must be serious attempts in outreach work to reach older adults who could or would not usually participate in positive aging activities. It is fundamental that positive aging dismantles those barriers which exclude older people, other than middle-class white urban females, from aging actively/successfully, and productively.

*Lifelong policies.* Following Asquith, positive aging must be based on creating good health choices and opportunities for social inclusion during childhood and adulthood. Rather than simply focusing on retirement age, policies must focus on lifelong healthy living, ranging from childhood nutrition to reduction of drug use (including smoking) to physical exercise. At the same time, it must be realized that active and productive aging will only be achieved if people reach later life following extensive periods in active employment and learning environments that equip them with the necessary skills and mental attitude to age positively.

*Fourth age.* Positive aging must drop its obsession with enabling older people to remain active at all costs and at maintaining a mid-life focus. Instead, rationales are to propose policies and action plans that emphasize that, despite physical and cognitive difficulties, people are still able to age successfully. As an emergent body of literature strongly demonstrates, the quality of active and learning participation amongst older people in the 'fourth age' is impressive and exceeds all expectations (Findsen and Formosa 112).

These policy directions point towards the need for positive aging to embrace the concepts of 'social integration' and 'social inclusion' in both its planning and coordination stages. In particular, policy makers must raise their concerns as how the most vulnerable sectors of the aging population are to be empowered to reach higher levels of active, successful, and productive aging, to counter societal and legal imperatives promoting disengagement later in life. There is an urgent need for policies to configure how positive aging can be achieved through strategic alliances between state welfare, private entities, non-governmental organizations, community relationships, and most especially, older people themselves. For positive ag-

ing policies to be successful, they must be constructed by older persons for older persons.

## CONCLUSION

Following Asquith, it can be stated that "despite the fact that the discourse of positive aging sounds positive, it is not" (266). Positive aging is destined to fail, not because its goals and objectives are not commendable. There is no doubt that positive aging (as expressed in the ideals of active aging, successful aging and productive aging) constitutes a good way forward. It is destined to fail because it is built on a wrong premise, namely presuming that if people are incapable of meeting the benchmarks of a positive aging experience, they have negatively (or unhealthily, unsuccessfully, or unproductively) aged. This is tantamount to a 'blame the victim' approach where vulnerable and disengaged elders are made to "bear the weight of failure as it is represented in the terms opposed to healthy, successful, and productive" (Asquith 266). Positive aging is also unethical in neo-liberal times because it transforms the 'public' issue of aging into a 'private' one where aging citizens themselves are expected to solve challenges that arise out of the political economical contexts of globalization and late capitalism (Mills 2). As Asquith notes, "positive ageing requires more than an individual response to the biological process of decay" (266). A more equitable way forward is a bottom-up approach that is sensitive to the social constructionist nature of aging and later life, and also attempts to direct more socio-economic and political resources towards the most vulnerable and frail members of the aging population. The recommendations posted in the penultimate section of this paper should surely serve as initial step towards such a goal.

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