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## RETHINKING POPULATIONAL AGING: THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PROCESS OF AGING IN BRAZILIAN SOCIABILITY

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this theoretical essay is to offer important information for thought and awareness about human aging within a historical process. The increase in the general population's life expectancy, a result of advances in medicine and technology among other factors, is considered a victory for society. However, this presents challenges for the XXI century, since this increase in the elderly population brings about changes in demands for social policies, such as an increase in people depending on constant care, as well as the lack of priority for these policies in public agendas, for instance. Based on this, the purpose of this study is to analyze the heterogeneity in the aging process and in old age in Brazilian sociability in order to critique the homogenization of the elderly group in Brazil. The project was carried out using bibliographical and documental research. In this context, we see old age as the tragic result of terrible labor and living conditions, aggravated by the current political situation in Brazil where neoconservative attacks on social rights are obvious.

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## INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will investigate the social issue of aging in Brazilian society today from a critical perspective, which is important in order to break with current, highly stigmatized, ideas and concepts on the issue, such as that aging constitutes a "social problem" due to the "organism's physical, physiological, or biological restrictions, to the democratic growth of the elderly population, to the restriction of social, family, and work roles," as stated by Teixeira (2009, p. 64), or when one adopts a perspective of aging as an individual problem, blaming its subjects for being solely responsible for managing aging, failing to take into consideration multiple factors. To this end, we shall debate the social issue of aging in the current Brazilian working class, from a critical perspective, showing that there is not a single old age, but instead old ages, as well as achievements in social protections, and the neoliberal attacks on social rights happening today. Considered an unprecedented historical event, populational aging can be attributed to various factors, such as current changes in demographics and health which can be seen in various dimensions of the social and economic system like urbanization and massification of information technology, investments in public health, and the use of antibiotics imported in the 1940s, immediately after World War II.

These are some of the processes that are closely related to the current drop in mortality which began in the 1930s, and to the decline in birthrate in the 1970s. In other words, we are saying the population is shrinking, the population's age structure has changed, and the number of elderly people has increased; in short, the population is aging. (CELADE/CEPAL, 2009; CONAPO, 2012; CELADE/CEPAL, 2021; United Nations, 2019) Meanwhile, these processes, apparently favorable to the consolidation of the rights of the elderly, have not always brought about advances in guaranteeing a dignified, healthy old age. To the contrary, they have reinforced markers that generate differences and inequalities, such as social class, sex/gender, ethnicity/race, and age/generation, which may promote homogenization and differentiation between what we call socioeconomic and cultural factors, fundamental to understanding the phenomenon (TEIXEIRA, 2018)

**Presentation of the Problem:** Population aging has established itself as a worldwide tendency, as projected by statistical data from developed and developing countries. According to Klein (2021), until the year 2050, the population over 60 will increase from 667 to 2,008 million, which correspond to percentages of 10.2% and 21.8% of the total population in the most developed countries. Similarly, until 2040 the population over 80 will increase from 87 to 395 million people.

However, when viewed within the whole context of society, we must not take for granted the idea that achieving populational longevity takes place in a linear, homogenous manner, since not all populations have had the same level of success in relation to longevity. In Brazil, changes in the populational dynamic are clear, unequivocal, and irreversible. We see that, in recent years, the number of elderly people has increased 18% in 5 years, and surpassed 30 million in 2017. This includes an increase of 4.8 million elderly since 2012, passing the mark of 30.2 million in 2017, a percentage that has a great tendency to double over the next decades, according to the National Sample Research of Continuous Domiciles, Characteristics of Residents and Domiciles. (IBGE Agency News, 2018)

*Between 2012 and 2017, the number of the elderly increased in every state of the union. The states with the greatest proportion of elderly are Rio de Janeiro and Rio Grande do Sul, both with 18.6% of their populations within the over-60 group. Amapá, on the other hand, is the state with the lowest percentage of elderly, with only 7.2% of the population. (IBGE Agency News, 2018, p. 1)*

It is clear that populational aging is a heterogeneous, multifaceted, complex phenomenon which brings together biological, psychological, social, democratic, ethical, and political issues, among others, according to Soares *et al.* (2014, p. 135). For these reasons, depending on the professional lens one uses to focus on this theme, we may find a lack of transparency to see reality since, very often, these issues do not impact the immediacy of real life, making it impossible to find a common denominator to approach the biological, psychological, and social issues that affect the issue in an interdisciplinary manner. This ends up universalizing and generalizing the aging process, as if it affects all people the same way, overcoming all relevant existing differences. We can see that there is, in fact, a heterogeneity in the process of demographic transition itself which is influenced by the population's access to civil, political, and social rights. According to this viewpoint, Soares *et al.* (2014, p. 135) state that "new postures of awareness are required, both from the State as from civil society, in relation to their rights, in order to bring about consistent social actions which take into account the various issues this segment must deal with."

However, there is no single theory on aging or old age. Examining the economic, social, cultural, and political determinants of this process, we see that it is the working class that is the protagonist in suffering, in old age, the consequences of precarious living and labor conditions, made worse at the moment in Brazil, when we see a distinct offensive from neoconservatism. Uncovering these determinants indicates that aging in the working class will constitute a major social problem due to the social vulnerability of this mass of workers who have lost their use to the capital due to their age, as Teixeira (2009, p. 67) states. For the poor of the elderly working class, this problem becomes even more serious due to the labor and living conditions they have been subject to their whole lives, living a "Tragic Old Age," as explained by Haddad, a phase of life which should be "characterized by a rest from work, protected by family and social policies, embraced by society, is instead crowned with decrepitude, abandonment, and denial of any sign of achievement in human emancipation." (Campelo and Paiva, 2014, p. 30; Haddad, 2017). Another important aspect of aging in this perspective leads us to reflect on the struggles and demands of the working class, which pressure the State and society, through mechanisms of organization and demands, to provide immediate answers to the "social issue of aging of workers and their fundamental determinations in regard to capital." (Teixeira, 2009, p. 66)

Thus, it becomes pertinent to critically debate and demystify the aging process, defending holding the State responsible for guaranteeing the rights of the elderly population through public policies geared towards dignified aging. The mobilization of civil society, for its part, has the role to demand that these policies be put into practice, overcoming the discrimination and prejudices which are camouflaged in the system as a natural characteristic, in order to contribute to building a society with no oppression of class, race/ethnicity, gender, or generation.

**Old age, phase of life, and various discriminations:** Given the *a priori* situation just presented, we understand that aging as a process, and old age as a phase of life, as well as longevity, are historical-social and cultural constructs that impact biological structures. (Beauvoir, 1997). Regarding aging, Araújo and Lucena (2005) confirm that, in the scientific literature, there are innumerable terms to refer to elderly men and women. However, as much as these nomenclatures try to paint or romanticize this phase of life, the authors agree that there should be no fear or denial as to the words *old age*, since this is simply a phase in human development, as important as the others. Among the different theories to explain human aging and old age, we call attention to traditional positivist social gerontology, the Anglo-Saxon paradigm (life trajectory), and capitalist ideology, among others. This makes it a challenge to reflect on the process of aging and old age, given the number of approaches.

To unravel the social problem of aging in Brazilian society, we must break with the ahistorical homogenization attributed to the process of aging and to the elderly population, stresses Teixeira (2017, p. 199), "as if biological and demographical aging were a unifying condition, and as if the social issues that affect workers were inexorable for the entire aging population." This author further argues that the elderly are treated as "a population without classes, without socioeconomic differentiators, that is, with no relation to the conditions of production and reproduction of capitalist society." (Teixeira, 2017, p. 199). According to the Report on Aging and Health from the World Health Organization (WHO, 2015, online), a child born in Brazil in 2015 can expect to live around 20 years longer than a child born 50 years ago. This is significant if we take into account the increase of years of life; however, these years may be characterized by an improved quality of life, or by negligence of human rights. This leads us to affirm that the increase in life expectancy is not synonymous with the labor and living conditions of members of society. Within the scientific literature on aging, most publications refer to the impacts of aging on health, and individual responsibility towards reaching old age with quality of life, assigning to them the control of behavior which goes against real experiences of life and survival, often relegated to societal bare minimums. Vulnerability in old age, for its part, becomes accentuated from time to time when the political dialogue (in its civic sense), which depends on a framework of trust, is substituted or accompanied by aspects of fear and mistrust from the neoliberal models of development. On this issue, we find situations such as loss of social ties in which the elderly suffer different processes of de-citizenship. This social situation which increases paranoia, corrodes "trust" as a metaorganizer of social relations and begins to exclude, at which point it appears to show a Thanatic side, in the sense that it "breaks" the ties of integration, social inclusion, and participation of its inhabitants, especially those of its elderly adults (Klein, 2020).

### What is the Reality of an Elderly Society?

In truth, the number of publications dealing with the issue of aging does not guarantee a true picture of an elderly society. This naïve positivist approach of cause and effect must be reconsidered. To Teixeira (2018, p. 124), demographics show averages, absolute numbers which almost always ignore and hide differences and inequalities that pervade the way men and women age. In this perspective, because we are dealing with the social-historical and political contexts of certain societies, the social meaning of the process of human aging takes on different concepts. Thus, approaching the aging of the working class as an expression of a social issue is important to uncover the economic, social, and political determinants that frame aging in Brazilian capitalist society. Thus, it behooves us to share our view of social issue which, according to Iamamoto (2005, p. 27), is

*[...] the set of expressions of social inequalities in a mature capitalist society, which has a common root: social production is more and more collective, labor becomes largely social, while appropriation of its fruits remains private, monopolized by a sector of society.*

Understanding the category of *social issue* is important to unravel the social issue of aging. This process is conditioned through social

relations which determine what social worth is attributed to certain groups and segments, based on each one's place in society and its importance to the society's productive and reproductive processes, with a view to the worth of usefulness to the capital (Escorsim, 2021). For the class which lives off its labor, Antunes (2021) shows that the economic crisis and the explosion of the coronavirus pandemic significantly increased both formal and informal unemployment, increasing poverty. Further, Antunes (2021, p. 115), says this "social tragedy" is not caused by the coronavirus, though it was exponentially amplified by the pandemic, due to the fact that the social tragedy was already in place before the situation of the pandemic. In the specific case of the repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic, several investigations point to omissions in health services, leaving aside health solutions for the elderly. At the same time, we witnessed how they became "scapegoats." The decision to label them as a "risk group" simply covered up the process of exclusion, in which they were made to be depositories of death, of the terrifying, and the persecutory. (Klein, 2020b)

**Towards a critical social model of gerontology:** To consider the social issue of aging in Brazilian society through a critical prism is to contribute to critical social gerontology, breaking with current ideas and conceptions on the issue. Through our chosen method, by uncovering the economic, social, cultural, and political determinants, we are able to investigate aging in the working class in its totality since, according to studies by Teixeira (2008) and Campelo and Paiva (2014), the working class is the main actor in the tragedy of aging, since they will suffer in old age the consequences of the precarious living and working conditions, made worse in the current situation in Brazil, in which we see both a health crisis and the advance of conservative attacks. In the process of productive restructuring and flexibilization of labor relations, workers submit themselves to precarious, unstable work, as pointed out by Lara and Canoas (2010, p. 155). These authors posit that, with the growth of the number of elderly, we see a rise in concern with workers over 40 who are currently unemployed. "The jobs that currently bring them income are temporary. The worker is forced to take refuge in 'sub-jobs' and face terrible salaries and working conditions." (Lara and Canoas, 2010, p. 155) Another issue is informal work, since these workers will "never reach the contribution period necessary for retirement, making their lives even more difficult." (Lara and Canoas, 2010, p. 155) In this labor situation which submits itself to the order of the capital, "man becomes workforce, the main merchandise in the capitalistic mode of production. This causes aging to be seen as a stage of decadence, of frailty and dependence. 'Old workers' are labeled as subjects to be cared for." (Lara and Canoas, 2010, p. 153).

It is clear that, in a context in which social policies began to be dismantled, we are going to see profound sociodemographic transformations with irreversible impacts, such as greater mortality among this age group, especially the elderly poor, stricken by chronic degenerative diseases, made worse by difficulties in accessing public services such as health, medication, and ortho0prosthetics, among others, due to current capitalist living conditions, which force everyone to join the fray for survival in the market (Teixeira, 2021). Beyond the arguments presented thus far, these days we also see ageism. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines it as the most "normalized" prejudice in the world, as if it were natural. According to Benedito (2022, p. 18), ageism is structuring, "given that, when we should be celebrating the victory of longevity, they are instead living a 'tragedy,' condemning workers to, in their old age, live the system of violence manifest in the violation of their fundamental right." According to this same author, we need "actions that seek discussion on this subject—we can only combat that which we know. The foundational stone of this combat is respect for the lives of all." (Benedito, 2022, p. 18). Given the aforementioned, we show a vision of capitalist society in relation to expressions of the social issue of aging in the working classes. In our next section, we reflect on the mobilization, the struggles, and the demands that pressure the capitalist State for answers that address social policies geared towards this particular segment of the public.

**An alternative to the system of the social safety net in Brazilian society:** Brazil's Federal Constitution, from 1988, is an important landmark for the elderly population, because it guarantees retirement by age, and a death pension for widowers, as well as an equalization of pension benefits (Brazil's Federal Constitution, 1988). In 1994, we have the first policy geared toward the elderly population, called National Policy of the Elderly (NPE). Law 8.842/1994 determines norms for the social rights of the elderly, guaranteeing autonomy, integration, and effective participation as an instrument of citizenship. This law is the result of mass mobilization of organized segments of society and represents a significant victory in legal terms. However, according to Teixeira, the NPE, as rich as it is in social protection, as a law has a notable formal and legalist character, which is not expressed in effective protective actions. In 1994's National Policy of the Elderly, established by Decree no. 1948 on July 3, 1996, we see in Article 3 what is understood as the *asylum modality*. This single paragraph states that assistance in the asylum modality occurs when there is a lack of a family group, abandonment, of a dearth of financial resources, either on the part of the elder or his/her family (Brazil, 1994). We shall reflect on this aspect through readings from meaningful, critical authors, as well as give voice to social assistants, showing how this works in practice.

Another victory of the elderly was the Statute of the Elderly, created through Law no. 10.741/2003, guaranteeing the right to life, freedom, health, food, education, culture and leisure, access to work, social security and assistance, habitation, free public transport, and priority service. We note that the violation of these presumptions provokes discrimination and social exclusion of the elderly (Law 10.741, 2003). In this investigation, we will reflect on the ideological content of policies directed towards the elderly population, for instance, putting the responsibility on the individual for his/her quality of life, and the impact of privacy culture on dealing with social issues. Thus, we note that the NPE and the Statute of the Elderly express the "maintenance of the regulatory functions of the State, especially the standardizing functions, but not the functions of administrator and main manager of social security." (Teixeira, 2009, p. 72) This is exactly our question: the role of the neoliberal State, which shares social responsibilities by sharing the social issue with family, community, and society as a whole. The State legitimizes and incentivizes the action of non-governmental organizations in the execution of social policies. As to the system of social protection and the articulation of various social policies, we shall analyze the social welfare policy, as it is related to our study subject. Social welfare actions geared towards dealing with expressions of this social issue in Brazilian capitalist culture take place in the private sphere, and its incorporation into the state apparatus is via philanthropy. We see this with the creation, in 1942, of the Brazilian Assistance League (BAL), "beginning from an initiative of private citizens, soon incorporated and *financed by the government*; however, it also counts on sponsorship from large patronal *corporations* (the National Industry Confederation and the Commercial Association of Brazil) and the participation of society *ladies*." (Iamamoto and Carvalho, 2005, p. 251, authors' italics) The BAL "seeks to find and channel political support for the government through its actions of assistance." (Iamamoto and Carvalho, 2005, p. 251) In short, it made partnerships with civil society in order to execute assistance activities.

With Brazil's Federal Constitution of 1988, Social Security is instituted, based on the tripod of health, social assistance, and social welfare. From there, according to Soares *et al.* (2017, p. 183), we see significant advances, including the diversity of the financial basis of Social Security, "which indicated a more democratic allocation of public resources, with the provision of a social security budget and the perspective of increasing coverage, with a focus on the idea of universal access to legally defined social rights." Other laws that guarantee these rights were approved in the 1990s, such as the Organic Law of Social Assistance (OLSA) (Law 8.142, 1993), which was altered by Law no. 12.435, in 2011, which defines social assistance as a citizen's right and a duty of the State and intends to promote social minima to guarantee access to basic needs for the vulnerable population. However, it incorporates principles which establish articulation with civil society organizations to respond to the

social vulnerability of workers, especially regarding the elderly population. What we see, in short, are changes and continuities in the forms of social intervention. Teixeira (2009, p. 170) says,

*[...] these go from the liberal phase, in which these forms of social protection were the responsibility of civil society, to state interventionism, to the current phase, with the return of liberalism (under new determinations and modes of operation). In all these phases, public and private protections are complementary.*

The social assistance services, programs, and benefits, as put forth in the National Policy of Social Assistance (NPSA) and the Organic Law of Social Assistance (OLSA) are contained in those offered by the Unified System of Social Assistance (USSA), from 2004, and are divided into Basic Social Protection (BSP) and Special Social Protection (SSP). The main objective of Basic Social Protection actions is the prevention of “[...] at-risk situations by strengthening family and community ties, geared towards the population which lives in a situation of social vulnerability, as a result of poverty, privation, or the fragilization of affective ties.” (Brazil, 2011, p.2). The office of Special Social Protection, on the other hand, is characterized by a set of protective services geared towards families and individuals who find themselves in situations of personal and/or social risk, due to the violation of their rights resulting from abandonment, physical or psychological mistreatment, sexual abuse, the use of psychoactive substances, fulfilling socio-educational measures, homelessness, and child labor, among others. (Brazil, 2009). Other instruments we can mention are the Basic Operation Norms of the USSA and the National Standardization of Services (Brazil, 2009), which determine that institutionalization of the elderly must be the last option, to take place only when family ties are broken or greatly weakened. In this sense, we can affirm that the State prioritizes family care over asylum care, and the Statute of the Elderly reinforces this guideline. “The National Policy of the Elderly (NPE), however, goes further, spelling out a wide range of non-familial modes of care, whose implementation is reduced and insufficient for the elderly population.” (Camarano and Barbosa, 2016) We see that the management of the Social Assistance Policy makes use of partnerships with civil society, which Teixeira (2009, p. 71) defines as a culture of creating need, and divides it into two basic vectors:

- 1) Their assumption of social responsibilities for social evils towards civil society, as part of the *métier* of making social policy in contemporary times;
- 2) Reinforcement of individual responsibility of each individual for his or her own well-being, through the re-use of therapies of integration, socialization, reinsertion, which are geared towards individuals, transmuting social problems into individual issues (an old strategy with gets constantly reused).

Based on these reflections, we infer that the advances and achievements of social rights and policies are still insufficient. They reveal that aging well and with quality of life is still seen as the exclusive responsibility of each individual. Furthermore, it reiterates the ideological-political discourse of the neoliberal approach, in which the State shares its responsibilities with civil society in providing social assistance services. We would also like to point out that, since the 1990s, with the counter-reform of the State, the advent of neoliberalism and the restructuring of production, in addition to the globalization of capital, we have seen a regression of the social rights achieved throughout history. Lately, the debate around public social policies has focused on opposing universalization, emphasizing the depoliticization and technification of social interests. (Bravo, 2009, p. 397) This author also points out the “importance of social struggles which were incorporated by various professions; among these, that Social Service is of fundamental importance in current times to fight the tendencies to reinforce the third sector, to minimize the State’s responsibility, and to increase participation of the citizenry.” (Bravo, 2009). This effort seeks to carry out work that looks after the quality of the services rendered and the breadth of access to them, which assumes the diffusion of information regarding social rights and ways to bring them about. It is about making efforts to ensure universal

access and/or increasing their reach. We agree with Yamamoto (2005, p. 17) when he says,

*The moment we live in is one full of challenges. More than ever, it takes courage, it takes hope to face the present. We much resist and dream. It is necessary to feed dreams and make them come true daily, in the hope of bringing about new times which are more humane, more just, and more supportive.*

The challenges are still numerous, including effective public policies geared towards the elderly population. The social demands of this age group, a consequence of populational aging, call the attention of academics and researchers from various fields of knowledge, especially in the scenario of the post-COVID-19 pandemic. Among them, we point out the care for the elderly in situations of social vulnerability and personal and/or social risk, since not all families have the means to maintain an elderly family member in their own home. Thus, institutions of prolonged permanence often become the only possibility to guarantee the care necessary to the elderly, re-establishing a dignified living condition. The family should not be blamed, since most elderly people in Brazil are cared for by their families with no effective support from the State. According to Camarano and Barbosa (2016), only 1% of the elderly are institutionalized. However, it is important to point out that, despite instituting mechanisms of democratic management defended in the 1988 Federal Constitution, in the neoliberal context we see a reduction of the State, which limits its actions without establishing norms and rules for supervision. At the same time, they legitimize social practices of “adjustment and social integration therapies that transfigure social problems into individual issues, a deal which aims to change or redefine the characteristics of the individual, to activate motivations to the change.” (Teixeira, 2009, p. 75-76) Thus, we can infer that there were advances in achieving social protection though the struggles and resistance of the working class throughout history; however, with the neoliberal offensive, we see these rights being taken apart. Therefore, as long as the production of wealth for the expansion of capital prevails to the detriment of meeting human-social needs, the aging of the working class will always be limited.

### Final Considerations

We have sought to discuss some important elements required to analyze the heterogeneity of the aging process and of old age, in order to infer critiques to the homogenization and vulnerability of this segment of Brazil’s population. In Latin America, with its marked social inequality, in 2016, the data indicate that, in the general population, 186 million people live in a situation of poverty, and 61 million live in extreme poverty. When it comes to the elderly, poverty is diminished due to systems of social safety nets, especially pensions and retirement funds. To reach our goal, we have critically debated the aging of the demographic profile, showing that the increase in the population’s life expectancy is due to advances in medicine and technology, among others. However, the growth of the elderly population presents various challenges for the XXI century, one of them being the interdisciplinary focus to direct specific public policies geared towards this population group. Thus, we identify two societal projects: (i) re-democratization and the guarantee of rights; and (ii) rearticulation of the forces that reiterate the neoliberal ideological-political discourse, with the reduction of the State, the attack on social rights, and changes in the world of labor. The reflections in this article allow us to understand the process of aging and old age in the working class in Brazilian society, showing that it is necessary to break with the ahistorical homogenization attributed to the process of aging and to the elderly population.

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