

81-7.129

OLD AGE IS NOT the necessary conclusion of human existence. Unlike the human body, old age does not even represent what Sartre has called "the necessity of our contingency." Many animals die after reproducing themselves, without going through a degenerative stage. However, it is an empirical, universal

On Aging

by Simone de Beauvoir



Arthur Tress

truth that after a certain number of years the human organism submits to degeneration. The process is inexorable. After a time the individual's activities are reduced; very often his mental faculties diminish and his attitude toward the world is altered.

Sometimes old age has been valued for political or social reasons. Certain individuals—for example the women in Old China—could find refuge in it from the harshness of the adult condition. Others accept old age with a deep pessimism: when the will to live seems a source of unhappiness, it is logical to prefer a half-death. But the vast majority approach old age either with sorrow or rebellion. It inspires more repugnance than death itself.

In fact it is old age, more than death, that is the negation of life. It parodies life. Death transforms life with destiny; in a way, it saves life by conferring on it an absolute dimension, "so that finally eternity itself changes it." It abolishes time. The man who is buried—his last days on earth have no more validity than the rest; his existence has become a totality, all of whose parts are equally present in the grasp of nothingness. Victor Hugo is at the same time and never both 30 and 80 years old. But when he was 80 his present life obliterated his past. This superseding is saddening when, as is almost always the case, the present is a degradation or even a denial of what was. Past events, acquired knowledge, retain their place when life is extinguished: they have been. But when memory crumbles they are engulfed in a mocking darkness: life is unraveled thread by thread like a tattered sweater, leaving nothing in the hands of the aged but the formless shreds. Even worse, the indifference which has overcome him challenges his own passions, his convictions and his activities. That was the case when de Charlus ruined the aristocratic pride which had been his *raison d'être* with a gesture of his hat. Or when Arina Pavlovki reconciled herself with a son she had always hated. What good is it to have worked so hard—"wasting your trouble," as Rousseau put it—if you no longer value the results you have achieved? Michelangelo's disdain for his "puppets" is heartbreaking—if we consider with him his old age we also feel sadly the vanity of his efforts. But with death these moments of discouragement can do nothing against the grandeur of his work.

NOT ALL OLD PEOPLE are resigned. On the contrary, many are distinguished by their stubbornness. Often, however, they become caricatures of themselves. Their will power perseveres out of a kind of inertia, without reason or even against all reason. At the beginning they were strong-willed because they had a certain goal in view. Now they remain strong-willed because they were strong-willed before. What happens on the whole with old people is that they substitute habits, reflexes, rigidity, for innovation. There is truth in an angry essay written by Faguet called "The Ten Commandments of Old Age" when he says: Old age is a continual comedy that people act out to create an illusion for themselves and others, and it is comical above all when it is badly acted.

Morality preaches the serene acceptance of those evils which science and technology are powerless to eliminate: pain, sickness, age. To bear bravely the very state which diminishes us will, it is claimed, help us grow. For lack of anything else to do, an aging person might become involved in this project. But here we are just playing with words. Projects only concern our activities. Growing old isn't an activity. Growing up, maturing, aging, dying: the passage of time is a fatality.

If old age is not to be a derisive parody of our past existence there is only one solution: to continue to pursue the goals which give meaning to our lives—devotion to individuals, to collectivities, to causes, to social or political work which is intellectual and creative. Contrary to what the moralists advise, we should wish to retain in our old age passions which are strong enough to prevent us from withdrawing into ourselves. Life keeps its rewards as long as people give of it to others, through love, friendship, indignation, compassion. Then there are still reasons to act or to speak. People are often advised to “prepare” for their old age. But if that simply means putting money aside, choosing a place for retirement or planning hobbies, one won’t be any more ready when the day arrives. Instead of thinking about it too much, people would be better off if they lived lives of involvement and purpose to sustain them after all illusions have been lost and passions cooled.

HOWEVER, THESE OPTIONS are only granted to a handful of the privileged: it is during old age that the gap between the privileged and the vast majority of men is widest. In comparing the two groups we can answer the question: what is there that is inevitable in the decline of the individual? To what extent is it society that is responsible?

It is clear that the age at which decline begins has always depended on the class one belongs to. Today a miner is finished at 50, whereas among the privileged, many carry their 80 years with ease. Drained of his forces sooner, the worker also suffers a much more rapid decline. His exhausted body is prey to injuries and sickness even in his prime, whereas an old person who has been able to take care of his body can keep it more or less intact until the day he dies.

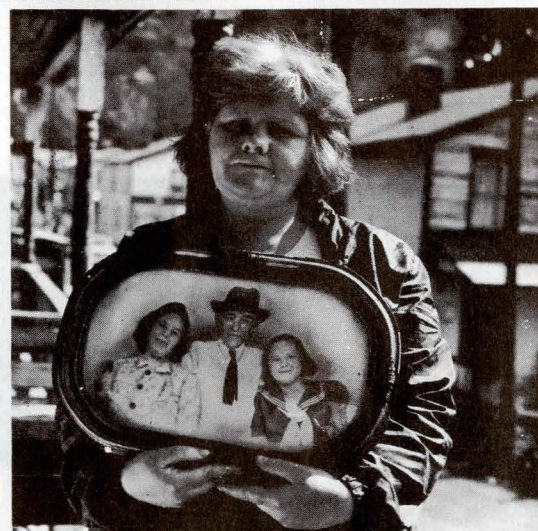
The exploited are condemned in old age to squalor or, at the very least, to severe poverty, oppressive living conditions and solitude, which lead to a sense of failing and a generalized anxiety. They sink into a stunned numbness which is reflected in their bodies: even the diseases which affect them are to a large extent the product of the system.

Even if a person in retirement preserves his health and his mental faculties he is still prey to the terrible blight of boredom. Deprived of his grip on the world, he is unable to regain it because apart from his work his leisure was alienated. The manual laborer isn’t even able to kill time. His morose idleness turns into apathy which compromises what remains to him of his physical and moral balance.

But the injury that is done to him in the course of his existence is even more basic. If a retired person feels des-



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perate about the meaninglessness of his present life it is because his life has been robbed of meaning throughout. A law implacable as the “Iron Law” has permitted him only to reproduce his life, denying him the opportunity of creating justifications for it. Outside the limits of his profession, he sees around him nothing but a wasteland: he was never given the chance to involve himself in projects which would have contributed to world aims, values, *raison d'être*.

THIS IS THE CRIME of our society. Its “politics of old age” is scandalous. But even more scandalous is the treatment the society inflicts on the majority of people during their youth and their maturity. Society “prefabricates” the mutilated, miserable condition which is their lot in old age. It is the fault of society that the decline of age begins prematurely and is precipitous, physically painful and morally terrifying—because people come to it with empty hands. When their strength deserts them, the exploited and alienated are fatally transformed into discarded rubbish.

That is why all the remedies that are proposed to alleviate the distress of old people are so ludicrous: none is capable of repairing the systematic destruction that has victimized them throughout their entire existence. Even if they



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are cared for, no one can give them back their health. Even if one builds for them decent places to live, one will not have created the culture, interests and responsibilities which would give meaning to their lives. I am not saying that it is entirely vain to try to improve their condition at this time. But that won't offer any solution to the real problem of old age, which is: What should a society be like so that in his old age a man can remain a man?

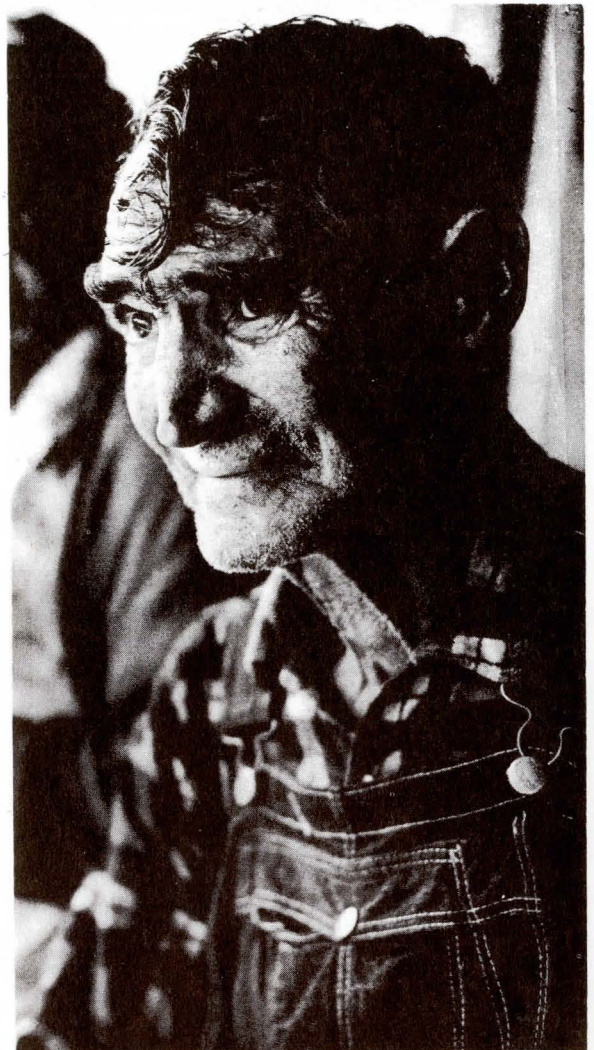
The answer is simple: he must always have been treated like a man. Society reveals itself in the fate it assigns to its inactive members: society has always considered them merely idle equipment. Society admits that only profit counts, that its "humanism" is purely façade. In the 19th century the ruling classes explicitly categorized the proletariat as barbarians. Workers' struggles have succeeded in integrating the proletariat into humanity, but only insofar as they are productive. The old workers' society turns its back on them as if they were a strange species.

This is precisely why the question has been buried in concerted silence. Old age denounces the failure of our whole civilization. It is the whole man that must be remade, and all relations among people recreated, if we want the condition of the old to be acceptable. A man shouldn't come to the end of his life alone and empty-handed. If culture were life and practice—and not inert knowledge, acquired once and then ignored—if the individual had, through culture, a grasp on his environment which fulfilled and renewed itself over the years, he would be an active, useful citizen at any age. If the individual from childhood on were not atomized, shut off and isolated among other atoms, if he participated in life, he would never know exile. Nowhere have such conditions ever been achieved. The socialist countries, if they approach this condition a little more closely than the capitalist countries, remain very distant from it.

IN THE IDEAL SOCIETY I am picturing we could dream that old age, so to speak, would not exist. Just as with certain privileged cases now, the individual, privately weakened by age but not visibly diminished, would one day fall victim to a fatal illness: he would die without suffering degradation. Old age would conform in reality to the definition that certain bourgeois theorists give to it: that is, a moment in existence which is different from youth and maturity, but possessing its own balance, and leaving open to the individual a wide range of possibilities.

We are far from that. Society concerns itself with the individual only insofar as he is productive. Young people know all about this. Their anxiety on entering social life is the counterpart of the agony of old people on being excluded from it. In the intervening time, daily routine masks these problems. A young person fears this machine which will use him up; sometimes he tries to fight back by throwing paving stones; the old man, rejected by it, used up, exposed, has nothing left but his eyes to cry with. Between the two the machine turns, crusher of men who let themselves be crushed because they cannot even imagine escaping from it. Once one has understood what the condition of old people is, one cannot be content to demand more generous "politics of old age," higher pensions, decent housing, organized leisure activities. It is the whole system which is at stake, and the demand can only be radical: to change life.

—TRANSLATED BY JUDY ORINGER AND DAVID KOLODNEY



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Simone de Beauvoir is well known as the author of The Second Sex, The Mandarins, and other works. The preceding is the concluding chapter of her new book on aging, La Vieillesse.

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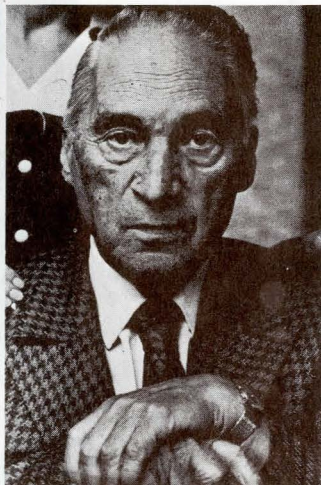
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Published By:

New England Free Press
60 Union Square
Somerville, Mass. 02143



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Stephen Shames/Photon West



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