# Reading 1 A new division of the life course

This is an edited extract from the first chapter of: Laslett, P. (1989) *A Fresh Map of Life: the Emergence of the Third Age*, London, George Weidenfeld and Nicoloson Limited.

During the period when it was declared that the life of man was three score years and ten, and almost ever since, most individuals have actually survived for less than half as long. Those in advanced societies today are the first population of creatures to exist in which almost every individual has a chance of full experience of the world, full in the sense of being in it for as long as they are capable of living. At all times before the middle of the twentieth century and all over the globe the greater part of human life potential has been wasted, by people dying before their allotted time was up.

It is not yet known [ … ] how long we could all go on existing if absolutely everything was entirely favourable to survival. That figure however is quite certainly considerably higher than seventy years, which makes the challenge even more imperative. How are we going to use this sudden, unprecedented, unanticipated release from mortality? How are we to conduct ourselves now that all of us can expect to live out something like the full natural span, whatever that may be?

In so far as this challenge has been recognized at all, the response has been one of fear and alarm, or so it seems to me. Instead of so rearranging our affairs, and so dividing up our lives, that we can begin to realize the full potential human experience for the first time in history, we have taken fright. In our own country at the moment all that we seem to be able to see is the ever growing number of failing elderly people who weigh upon the individuals who support them. Ageing is seen as a burden on society at large because resources have to be found to give older people incomes, provide for their ever failing health, to maintain institutions for those who cannot be supported otherwise.

This sad story, which we perpetually repeat to ourselves, has a plot [ … ] The numbers of elderly, and especially of the very elderly, are growing very fast. Since they are living longer, maintaining them is becoming ever more expensive. Even providing them with company gets more difficult since the numbers of young are decreasing whilst the numbers of old are increasing. Our work-force is ageing rapidly, losing its younger members and being unable or unwilling to retain its superfluity of older ones. Europe and the West are growing old and will never be young again.

A really slow and solemn burden, it has to be admitted, to which to try to write a descant. Yet even if the facts and circumstances on which accepted dogmas about age and ageing are based were all objective truth, which many or most of them are not, there would still be another story to be told. Much of the accepted account of age and ageing is simply the persistence into our own time of perceptions belonging to the past.

It was never true that all those in later life were in reality the decrepit dependents of the story which has been set out. Two of the later chapters of this book make frequent reference to a woman believed by the eminent philosopher who left us the record to be over a hundred years old in 1681, and who was exceedingly likely to have been well over ninety years old. Yet she was as independent and lively a person, both in mind and body, as could be imagined. But in earlier times people after the age of sixty-five and sixty, retirement birthdays in our country though no one knows quite why, must more often have been impotent and helpless than persons of such ages are today. It was more understandable, if never forgivable, that our predecessors should take the maimed minority for the whole body of the elderly.

The numbers of elderly and old were in any case much fewer then than they are today, so that this misjudgement, this culpably false classification, mattered less. What is more, [ … ] it was only very recently that those in later life ceased to be a tiny, sometimes almost negligible, minority of the whole population, and ceased to consist to such an extent of the infirm. When we talk in the accepted pessimistic fashion about age and ageing, we are simply repeating traditional language which was a more understandable form of discourse up to the First or even the Second World War, until in fact the childhood of those who are themselves elderly in the 1990s, more understandable but even then, as we shall see, never appropriate.

The categorical error of taking the minority of the problematic elderly, the chronically sick, those who cannot look after themselves, those who have to live in institutions, those about to die, for the whole body of the retired, is the most damaging survival from the past. But it is not the only assumption about age relationships which has been falsified during the present half century.

All our ageing expressions have become inaccurate, and many of them obsolete. They provide us with the misleading images of children, adults, those in the prime of life, a phrase to be noted because we are going to shift the prime of life a long way towards the later years, as well as those in middle age, late middle life and those already in retirement. For the age constitution of our society has been transformed, quite suddenly and without our realizing what has happened. In addition to this it has to be reckoned that the institutions and instruments which have been created to meet the problem of ageing are in no position to provide us with a policy for that great majority of retired people who present no problem at all. We need a new outlook, a new language and we need above all a new institution, or set of institutions.

I have insisted that the air of despondency which surrounds the subject of ageing has arisen to a considerable extent because of a misclassification of the whole society of retired persons as if they belonged to a very small part of themselves. But I have had to be careful to insist that this is not the whole explanation. The elderly have not simply been misclassified, they have also been demeaned by attributing to each and every one of them deleterious descriptions properly belonging only to the afflicted and decrepit minority. ‘Senile’, ‘geriatric’ along with many other adjectives originally quite innocent of an insulting meaning, are standard epithets of abuse. These are not simply errors of description, they are part of that stereotyping process which has the effect, which some claim may be intentional, of removing signs of effectiveness and worth from the elderly, disposing of them as of no account. Nevertheless, the errors of misclassification have been real. They make it imperative for us to be absolutely clear about the terms of our discussion, and to select our vocabulary with some care.

In the terminology to be recommended here the damaging misclassification which we have been discussing would be defined as mistaking the Fourth Age for the Third, or taking the Fourth Age as properly descriptive of all those no longer living in the Second Age. It is the phrase the Third Age which is the real novelty in this sentence, and it implies a different arrangement of stages of life from any one that has previously been suggested.

The Third Age is a phrase of French origin, and was used in the title of Les Universités du Troisième Age when they began to be instituted in France in the 1970s. It seems to have entered Anglo-Saxon vocabulary when the first of the British Universities of the Third Age was founded at Cambridge in the summer of 1981. Because of the spread of these societies in the United Kingdom, and perhaps also because of the perennial need for a term to describe older people, a term not already tarnished, the expression is now in fairly common use.

Dividing life experience into numbered stages is as old as the study of age and ageing, and the various usages are often to be met with in our literature. William Shakespeare, for example, was following a commonplace, a threadbare literary tradition when he put the speech about the seven ages of man into the mouth of Jaques in As You Like It. Large numbers of titles and principles of division have been suggested; some of them have been used, a few have been very widely used and survive into our own generation.1 The phrase which has been the most recent to arrive is the Third Age. The Third Age has not as yet been employed at all systematically, as far as I know, that is in relation to a First Age, a Second Age and perhaps a Fourth Age or even higher number of ages. Here however it will be taken as belonging to a numerical order of the whole life course, and the quadripartite division can be justified as follows.

First comes an era of dependence, socialization, immaturity and education; second an era of independence, maturity and responsibility, of earning and of saving; third an era of personal fulfilment; and fourth an era of final dependence, decrepitude and death. Such a fourfold numbered system has many precedents and many rivals. The present scheme differs from its predecessors in several ways, one of them quite radical.

In this analysis of life experience the divisions between the four ages do not come at birthdays, nor do they even lie within clusters of years surrounding birthdays. Moreover the life career which is divided into these four modules has its culmination in the Third Age, the age of personal achievement and fulfilment [ … ] not in the Second Age and emphatically not in the Fourth.

[This approach provides] ideas for individuals thinking about their own ages, those of their spouses, children and friends.

Anxiety is often present when people reflect on such possibilities, anxiety about the prospect of dependence, becoming dependent yourself or finding others becoming dependent upon you. Such worries are so widespread and dependence is so conspicuous amongst a proportion of the elderly, that most writings on age and ageing seem to be preoccupied with them. Using the vocabulary just discussed, a great deal of this anxiety can be accounted for by the confusion which has already been identified, the confusion made by an individual in his/her own case between the Third Age and the Fourth, assimilating the age of fulfilment with the age of decline. This makes it crucial that the stretch of life which has been nominated as the Third Age should have its own title, and should be seen as separate from all the rest [ … ].

There can be no doubt whatever that dependence and decrepitude have always been inseparably associated with becoming old, however active, useful and healthy many people have been at the high, higher, and even highest calendar ages. Such an association can never have been more than partially justified as a general description of a particular calendar age. The effect of failing to make the distinction implied in the phrase the Third Age, therefore, must have fastened upon the senior members of all societies, past and present, inappropriate and damaging descriptions of their physical and mental state and we shall have to devote a whole chapter to this subject. This obstinate unwillingness to see the Third Age apart from the Fourth has sanctioned their exclusion from activities, especially earning activities, for which nearly all of them have been perfectly well suited, has debased their status in the eyes of their juniors, and above all has devalued them in their own estimation of themselves. [ … ]

Now that a fifth and more of our whole population is classed as retired, the results of this seemingly deliberate mass depreciation scarcely bear contemplation. The waste of talent and experience is incalculable. [ … ] The fact that those who write off the elderly are also writing off themselves, as they will be in a decade or two’s time, defies understanding. [ … ]