

INTERNATIONAL VIEW

The Power of Silver: Age and Identity Politics in the 21st Century

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Pensioner political movements emerged in the interwar years in America and Europe. Documentary and empirical analyses confirm the influential role such movements played in helping shape the postwar social security systems of Western societies. Pensioner movements, qua pensioner movements, have failed to retain their influence, despite that “old age” and its demographic significance have become more salient. We propose three explanations for this: the first concerns the failure of old age to connect with the generational ethos of identity politics; the second reflects the nature of the actors now involved in the governance of old age; and the third concerns the individualization of retirement as a phase of life.

KEYWORDS identity politics, pensioners, aging

INTRODUCTION

Pensioner political movements emerged in the interwar years in America and Europe. There is much evidence at both documentary and empirical levels that confirms the influential role these movements played in helping

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shape the social security systems of Western societies in the immediate postwar era (Amenta, Caren, & Olasky, 2005; Macnicol & Blaikie, 1989). It is a paradox that despite the fact that old age and its demographic importance have become of increasing political salience since then, pensioner movements have failed to capitalize on their early start. While new social movements organized around identity rather than interest rose in prominence during the long 1960s (Cohen, 1985), political movements organized around old age as an oppressed identity seem, in contrast, to have declined in significance throughout much of the Western world.¹

If pensioner politics have retreated from center stage, the politics of pensions has not. Indeed, pensions and how to fund them are the focus of intense debate both within and among existing parties across Europe and form a key element in the wider debate over the future of the welfare state (Bonoli, 2000; Feldstein & Siebert, 2002). Although eschewing the terms *pensions* and *pensioners*, a similar debate over the future of social security has preoccupied domestic politics within the United States (Feldstein, 2000). The new politics of pensions, however, concerns the fate of future rather than contemporary retirees and implicates the electorate as a whole. The already existing population of retirees is by and large marginalized as agents in such debates, represented primarily as beneficiaries of a system that is no longer sustainable (Bonoli, 2000). Attempts to raise the issue of pensioner poverty continue to be made by various age-based advocacy groups, but pensioner poverty no longer defines later life, and such advocates draw but muted support from the retired populations in most Western societies. It is only in Russia and some other formerly communist Eastern European states that pensioner poverty has been a source of political mobilization among pensioners themselves (Chandler, 2004; Jones, 2002).

Although assertions of identity have permeated politics since the early 19th century (Tilly, 2004), identity politics rose in prominence particularly during the long 1960s in North America and Europe when it became known as the new social movement associated with gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Kenny, 2004). The key issue of identity politics, according to Nancy Fraser (1995), is the need for greater cultural representation of minority groups rather than for greater economic redistribution. The absence or marginalization of the voices of women, gay people, and people of color in most Western societies was central to the political agenda of the new social movements, rather than their relative poverty. While few in these movements denied the existence of relatively greater poverty rates among minorities, under conditions of rising postwar affluence, poverty was not their central platform. Rather, it was the denial of full personal and cultural recognition that galvanized their membership. This was the fundamental form of oppression, limiting people to “a false, distorted, reduced mode of being” (Taylor, 1992, p. 25). Unlike traditional class-oriented politics, with their focus on trade unions and the labor movement, identity politics

“managed to achieve what the new left has never been able to do on its own—the political mobilization of masses of citizens on behalf of their emancipatory goals” (Kriesi, 1999, p. 399).

Within this new politics of recognition, age failed to find its voice. Claims for “a growth in political participation among older people at grass-roots level” (Walker, 1998, p. 33) have not been substantiated. This is despite the substantial organizational investment that has been expended in trying to create such a phenomenon, for example, in the Federation Européenne des Retraites et Personnes Agées, an internal organ of the European Trade Union Confederation. The politics of redistribution, espoused by earlier generations and central to the earlier debates over income security in old age, no longer matches the tenor of the times. Although there have been examples of new social movements associated with old age—the Gray Panthers are the most noticeable international example—these movements have failed to develop their political agenda, perhaps because of their adoption of a generalized left-radical critique of society that has itself become dated by the political imperatives of the post-socialist world order (Fraser, 1995). Older pensioner platforms based around universal demands for greater income equality have grown weaker as the position of pensioners, vis-à-vis other needy groups, has improved. Despite contemporary prophesies of the revolutionary potential of “gray power” (Durandel, 2003), there is little evidence that such revolutionary potential is being realized. Given the demographic weight of old age, what might account for the failure of already existing pensioner movements to survive and prosper? And why has age figured so little in the new politics of identity? Whether as social gerontologists or political sociologists, some explanation is needed to resolve this conundrum. The focus of our paper is to outline such an explanatory framework.

EVIDENCE OF PENSIONER POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Before considering explanations for the decline in pensioner politics, we need to justify our claim that pensioner politics is indeed marginal to current political activity in Western societies. Table 1 shows the size of the 65 and older age group in the major countries of Europe, the size of this age group compared with people of working age, the number of “senior” or “pensioner” parties that are active in each country, and their relative capture of the national vote, contrasted with the number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) advocating on behalf of the aged in each country.

As Table 1 shows, despite the large numbers of senior voters in each country and the extensive number of agencies advocating for the aged/seniors/pensioners, there are few signs that they form an effective collective movement representing the political aspirations of the old. There is equally

TABLE 1 Age Demographics, Pensioner Parties, and Age Advocacy Groups in Europe, 2004–2006

Country	Total population ^a	% ≥65 2004	Dependency ratio, 2004	No. of pensioner/ seniors parties, 2004 ^b	No. of pensioner/ seniors parties, 2006	Total no. of old age national organizations, 2004	% maximum electoral vote at national elections, 2002–2006
Belgium	10.2 m	17.0%	52.2%	0	0	9	0
Czech Republic	10.2 m	13.8%	43.4%	0	0	2	0
France	59.2 m	16.0%	53.2%	0	0	19	0
Germany	82.0 m	16.4%	46.9%	1	1	10	0.4%
Greece	10.6 m	17.6%	48.4%	0	0	n/a	0
Italy	57.5 m	18.1%	47.8%	1	0	3	0.9%
Netherlands	15.8 m	13.6%	46.9%	1	1	7	0.4%
Poland	38.6 m	12.1%	45.5%	1	1	3	<0.1%
Romania	22.4 m	13.3%	46.1%	1	1	1	0
Russia	145.5 m	12.5%	43.8%	1	1	2	5%
Serbia/Montenegro	10.6 m	15.3%	52.9%	0	0	n/a	0
Spain	39.9 m	17.0%	46.4%	0	0	11	0
Ukraine	49.5 m	13.8%	46.3%	0	0	2	0
United Kingdom	59.4 m	15.8%	53.2%	0	1	9	0

Note: ^aData on European countries with a population of 10 m or more, from International Social Security Association (2004, Sept).

^bData on parliamentary parties and national election results from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_parties_in_Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, etc., all accessed June 1, 2009), from www.noticias.info (retrieved on August 4, 2005), and from www.wikipedia.com (retrieved, by country, on October 12, 2006, and again on April 15, 2007). Data on national old age advocacy organizations from AARP International (2003) (retrieved April 15, 2007, and again on May 25, 2007).

little evidence that, outside of Russia, pensioners have acted en masse in terms of reported extra parliamentary activity at either a national or local level (Durandel, 2003; Naegele & Walker, 1999). Advocacy groups exemplified by the various national Alzheimer's disease societies have moved to the fore, replacing mass-membership associations with professionally managed organizations (Skocpol, 2003). In much of Europe, pensioners and their movements have been overshadowed by the growth of professionalized charities or, as some have suggested, have been crowded out by labor and employer organizations (Anderson, 2001). To provide an explanatory structure for this development, we focus on three factors, namely, the incompatibility between age and the ethos of the new social movements, the institutionalization of welfare regimes and new sites of conflict within the mixed economy of care, and the individualization (or deinstitutionalization) of retirement.

AGE, GENERATION, AND THE NATURE OF IDENTITY IN IDENTITY POLITICS

Throughout most of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, political activity focused on the social relations of production. Class was the dominant motif, with religious affiliation at times a close second. Only after the postwar welfare state was established did conditions emerge for an alternative basis for politics, namely, the politics of identity. The requirements of a politics of identity demanded not so much votes as voices challenging the invisibility of minorities. The marginalization and oppression of minorities had remained unaffected by the universal [male] suffrage that had already been achieved at the start of the 20th century. Theirs was an invisibility born of a convenient ignorance and maintained by an automatic and sometimes actively antagonistic exclusion from the major social and cultural institutions of the state and civil society. Challenging that exclusion by exposing the processes by which it was maintained helped reveal the forces that lay behind it, forces that were connected to the exercise of power that was invested in an older generation that had grown up before World War II.

Such politics were not just a question of direct action and politics: "psychological work" was demanded to reveal and restructure the devalued identities that had been acquired and internalized by years of living as a silenced minority, worth no more than the dominant groups would pay. An important aspect of this was consciousness raising, uncovering and learning to contest the internalized representations of self that had been created by the dominant majority, and replacing them with a new sense of self-worth based on the collective achievements of a newly imagined community (Sarachild, 1978). Within the psychologically charged politics of the personal, what place could be found for age? In the women's movement, in

Black movements, and in the gay and lesbian movements of the 1960s and 1970s, conflict with authority was the motif. The old were seen, if at all, as part of the problem. Older people were the complacent reactionary figures of the past. Middle age was conflated with old age. The new social movements were born within the wider context of an affluent generation of young people brought together by music, fashion, and look. The ethos of the new social movements excluded age just as surely as class politics had excluded the various ethnic and cultural minorities that were now finding their voices.

In sum, the identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s did not play well for pensioner style parties. The Gray Panthers in the United States were the exception. Formally established in 1972 and consciously echoing the militant Black nationalism of the Black Panthers, they combined an identity politics around old age with the generic radicalism of the antiwar movement. They made calls for better access to health care and improved social security pensions as well as greater representation of African Americans in government policy. The Gray Panthers sought to establish themselves not as a single-issue pensioners' party but as a transgenerational progressive political movement associated with the left-of-center political currents of the time. The Gray Panthers have survived, still focusing on the same left-of-center agenda in an increasingly right-of-center political climate. Advocates of national health care, a patients' bill of rights, women's reproductive rights, legalization of marijuana, lower-priced prescription drugs, more affordable housing, the use of renewable energy resources, and, in foreign policy, the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, reform of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, normalization of relations with Cuba, and opposition to the Iraq War, the Gray Panthers remained outside mainstream U.S. politics, with little grassroots support from the majority of America's over-50s.

Single-issue pensioner politics still exists, especially in postcommunist Europe. In the 2003 elections for the Russian State Duma, the Russian Pensioners' Party (Rossijskaja Partija Pensionerov [RPP]) obtained more than 3% of the national vote, taking eighth place in elections that were contested by over 40 different political parties ("Elections in Russia," n.d.). Pensioner parties, albeit with smaller portions of the vote, are active in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia, while in Croatia they hold crucial seats in a largely hung parliament. But all these single-issue parties are founded on redistributive claims for better pensions and a fairer deal for pensioners: they are not Gray Panthers seeking recognition for their old age but are older people seeking restitution of their previous economic security. In the formerly communist countries, the impact of the near collapse of the previous communist regimes' social protection schemes fell hardest on the standard of living of pensioners. Retirees are one of the largest groups that have been affected by the decline in social protection (Foley, 1999). They

are most active where the state withdraws or fails to maintain the previous state pension safety net, as in Russia, where cuts in social benefits such as free transport and medicines and heavily subsidized accommodation led to massive street protests at the beginning of 2005 (Osborn, 2005).

Even when formal pensioner parties exist, as in Holland or Italy, they have failed to engage most older people, collecting less than 0.5% of the national vote, and have exercised no positive influence in the conflict over pension reform (Lynch, 2006). Most large European countries do not have pensioners' parties (e.g., France, Germany, Poland, and Spain), although they have a growing number of age advocacy groups. Despite the "graying" of Europe, there is, with one or two exceptions noted, no wish or demand for any collective political representation of older people as a culturally or socially oppressed group deprived of a voice within society. Old age is not an identity that creates any sense of solidarity or stirs any new desire for recognition: It remains an ascribed community defined by social policy. Only when the postwar systems of social security have collapsed, as in the former Soviet Union, does old-age poverty reemerge as a rallying point for the masses.

THE MANAGEMENT OF OLD AGE AND NEW SITES OF CONFLICT

According to the French historian Jean-Pierre Bois, old age first appeared as a social category in the 18th century, as European states sought to impose law and order on the increasingly deracinated poor who were roaming the towns and countryside (Bois, 1994). Although old people were placed formally within the category of "the deserving poor," their chronological age was less defining than was their frailty. A substantial number of the undeserving beggars, arrested as public dangers, had recorded ages in their 60s and 70s (Adams, 1990). The nation state has expanded its role considerably since then through the provision of income support, through health care, and through extrafamilial systems of support for those unable to manage the activities of daily life. These developments have also formed the basis of conflict over the level of and the mechanisms by which income support, health care provision, and domiciliary support are secured.

The first phase in this struggle concerned income support, for unemployment arising from sickness, disability, and old age, on the one hand, and structural unemployment arising from a lack of employment opportunities on the other. This phase, evident from the late 19th century onward, was pursued primarily within class-based politics concerning the redistribution of resources. The outcome was finally and fully realized in the post-World War II welfare state consensus. During various stages in the development of income support/social security, trade union organizations, political parties supporting the rights of working people to a greater share of the social

surplus and, later, specific groups representing the interests of already existing pensioners pressured governments to improve the level of poverty protection and income maintenance (Baldwin, 1990; Macnicol & Blaikie, 1989).

Social policy debate in the period since World War II has involved the state's own institutional structures and allied professional bodies that have acted increasingly as the major actors in these debates (Pierson, 1996). Pensions have reentered the political debate, but not primarily through the agency of retired people themselves or through the activity of working class organizations. Rather, they have been dominated by the various institutional structures that support and sustain the welfare state and the rising numbers of economic policy analysts preoccupied by the impact of the aging demographics of Western societies on state pension schemes (Disney, 1996; Feldstein, 2000). In part, this is a mark of the success of old-age antipoverty programs. In Britain, France, Germany, and Italy, incomes among people older than 60 have increased at a faster rate than have the incomes of people of working age, while increasing wealth (fueled by rising levels of home ownership and house prices) has selectively benefited older people (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005). Income maintenance in old age is no longer the focus of conflict that it was when old age, like the working class, was seen as synonymous with poverty and economic distress. Rather, the apparent success of government policy in improving the financial position of older people has itself produced a new generational politics. Although by no means confined to the United States, the generational warfare that broke there in the 1980s (and that still continues) has been particularly impassioned in its focus on the unfair advantage retired people have gained at the expense of the young and for the misfortune of future generations (cf. Peterson, 1999; Third Millennium, 1999).

Predictions that "pensioners [are] the next militant group waiting" (BBC News Online, 2000) have already proved to be false dawns. The conflicts and contested renegotiations of contemporary pension reform involve young workers facing a depletion of the social wage that they see an older generation enjoying. It is those in work, not those who have left the labor market, who now struggle for the conditions that will secure their future old age as governments attempt to rein in the anticipated costs of future pension payouts. Lynch (2006, p. 170) notes the paradox of this position in that the pensioners' sections of the Italian trade union movement "voted an overwhelming 91% in favor of . . . pension reform" that would reduce future pension spending. The politics of pensions is a worker's not a pensioner's struggle; it is a struggle over economic interests, not age-based identity.

The second focus of conflict has been around health care. In contrast to income support in old age, health care for older people has risen up the political agenda in the last half century. In Britain, members of Parliament have been elected on the basis of a single health-related issue, namely, hospital closures, in a way that 20 or 30 years ago would have seemed

impossible. Health is of universal concern and is viewed by adults of all ages, both sexes, and all classes as the most important thing in life (Health Survey for England '96, 1998). In countries where the state purchases and provides most health care, the debate has become one of managing performance in terms of obtaining maximum benefits from public investment in health care services (Freeman, 2000). In the United Kingdom, following the 1980 Health Services Act, cash limits, efficiency savings, and a measure of privatization were introduced, initially in terms of ancillary services, although this has since expanded. At the time, the act created considerable public-sector militancy over the issue of cuts, but this reflected the concerns of health workers, rather than of particular patient groups (Higgs, 1993). Neither identity politics nor single-issue politics played a significant part. Union membership in public sector health and social services was, and by and large has remained, relatively high, with around 60% of full-time public-sector health and social care staff members of a union (Grainger & Crowther, 2007). The repoliticization of health care in the United Kingdom during the 1970s and 1980s was essentially a class struggle set in the context of the welfare state in which, notionally at least, the public “owned” the means of production (in the form of tax revenues), which was managed on their behalf by the government they elected. In such circumstances, the success of the workers could be and was reframed as a cost to the general public, and particularly the most vulnerable public—the sick and disabled—among whom people older than 65 predominated. Hence, the struggles over the provision of health care that emerged in the 1980s did not connect with patient groups or with the retired population that makes most use of Britain’s National Health Service resources, but were conducted primarily as the struggles of public-sector workers to retain their economic position.

Finally, the third potential site of conflict over the governance of old age is the provision of social support for everyday living. In 1960, total welfare spending (education, health, and social security) represented 15% of Britain’s gross domestic product, of which some 0.4% were for personal social services. In Britain in 2003, total welfare spending had risen to 33% of gross national product, of which expenditure on personal social services represented some 1.4%. The largest share of personal social services expenditure goes toward services to people aged 65 and older, who receive 45%, followed by children and families, who receive 24%; disabled adults of working age, who receive 21%; the mentally ill, who receive 6%; and other service recipients, the remaining 4%.

In other words, spending for personal social services has increased almost five-fold, a greater increase in national expenditure than in health care. Even over a decade (1995–2005), spending has more than doubled. At the same time, there has been a notable shift away from institutional care toward community forms of care. At the start of the 20th century, when some 8% of the British population were aged 60 or older, more than

5% were in some form of institutional setting (Williams, 1981); by the end of the century, when over 21% of the population was older than 60 years and the proportion of people aged 80 and older among those older than 60 had increased 20-fold, fewer than 4% were in institutions (Tomassini, 2005). By reducing the number of hospital long-term care beds, the British government moved the issue of social care more firmly toward local rather than national government. The result is that most personal social service expenditure is delivered via local rather than national government, and conflicts over the money spent on mentally ill people, people with learning disabilities, or frail old people have become matters of local rather than national concern. Localized conflicts over decisions to close a day center, increased levels of personal contributions to home care services, or limits to the number of hours a service can be provided are led by those whose jobs are affected by the closure and rarely reach a wider national agenda.

Personal social services represent a small proportion of national expenditure. They are provided through locally regulated agreements and delivered to a small minority of people, including a minority of people older than 65 (fewer than 1% of people aged 65 to 74 use home care services or meals on wheels or attend day centers [Office for National Statistics, 2000, table 8.18]). As such, they do not constitute forms of political oppression against which a political identity of agedness can usefully be built. Recipients of personal social services remain a marginalized if needy minority within which the only politics of identity that is played out concerns relative underprovision to people from Black and minority ethnic communities or battles between various user groups demanding a greater share of the resources (e.g., mentally ill or young disabled people). There is little call for unity across the diverse groups of users and their representatives.

The increasing privatization that this shift toward community care brought about has, if anything, led to even less militancy over the area of social care compared with the health sector. Where once staff in local authority care homes and long-term geriatric or psychogeriatric hospitals would form collective blocks capable of drawing attention to needs in this field, this sector is now dominated by privately contracted home care services the staffs of which are not members of any professional or trade union organization. The individualization of "care packages" and the incentivization of direct payments have segmented the provision, and hence the providers, of welfare while reinforcing the centrality of management and their incorporation as purchasers acting on behalf of the aged as a client group (Scourfield, 2007). Although we have used the United Kingdom as an example, similar processes in the individualization and privatization of long-term care can be found in much of Western Europe (Timonen, Convery, & Cahill, 2006).

THE INDIVIDUALIZATION OF RETIREMENT

If identity politics and protest movements have tended to ignore age or have seen age as a characteristic of the oppressors rather than the oppressed, the struggles over welfare during the same period have been framed around future consequences for workers of maintaining the status quo and the desirability of preserving or advancing the position of workers in the public sector. Indeed, the conflicts have sometimes been presented by governments and by the media as either conflicts between the interests of workers and the interests of the public or conflicts between tax payers and welfare recipients. Retired people, en masse, have not identified with workers' struggles or been particularly strong supporters of (or wished to be identified as) users of social services or welfare recipients. Furthermore, pensioners have not been ardent advocates for improved benefits for the sick and disabled, low-income parents, the unemployed, or single parents. In many cases, they have been less supportive than the population as a whole toward those in poverty (Parks, Phillips, & Robinson, 2007).

The mass nature of old age exists primarily as rhetoric for policy makers, public-service unions, professional bodies whose jobs depend on serving old people, and nonstatutory advocacy groups whose existence also depends on their representing themselves as advocates for the assigned community of old age as "the fourth age." In reality, retirement has become increasingly individualized. In contrast to the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, when most old people were grouped together as old-age pensioners, the social categorization of retirees has become more differentiated and less easily represented by a one-dimensional old-age pensioner. A minority of retired people remain at or below the poverty line—more so in Britain than in other countries in continental Europe—but many are well above it. State pensions no longer exercise the determining influence on old people's economic status that they once did. In 2004, real incomes of U.K. "pensioner units" had risen by 25% since 1996, after taking account of inflation, a rate significantly "faster than that for non-pensioners" (National Statistics, 2004). Over the last 25 years, pensioner net income has more than doubled in real terms. The exceptions are the cohorts of people in their 80s, the majority of whom continue to be fully dependent on state pensions, reflecting their historically limited access to occupational and personal pensions.

With increasing income comes increasing differentiation. The community of old age ceases to have social meaning beyond that ascribed to it by social policy. Social policy itself plays a less influential role in shaping the lives of older people than it did in the decades immediately after World War II. As their lives incorporate more divergent trajectories, retired people have less in common with each other. Their lives reflect changing national and global economic fortunes, successive shifts in domestic policy, and transformations in the nature of work and working conditions. There is less to be

gained and much to be lost from embracing a common identity as an old-age pensioner. Although age is still a significant factor in determining who votes, as Phil Mullan has pointed out, “[A]ge is probably the least significant ‘group’ indicator of *how* people vote. Gender, color, income, and wealth are all much more important” (Mullan, 2001). Only under conditions of common severe disadvantage, as is evident in postcommunist Russia, has there been a reason to strive for a shared redistributive politics of old age.

RUSSIAN AND U.S. EXCEPTIONALISM

If old and middle-aged people in the West represented the establishment for those in the vanguard of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, they occupied a very different position in the Soviet Union. Old-age pensions were established in the Soviet Union during the 1920s, but their coverage was extremely patchy and poorly provided until the 1950s. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union was concerned with the needs of workers and soldiers. Pensioners represented neither of these groups. Contributing no labor to either the production or maintenance of the revolutionary state, old people were seen as symbols of the old, prerevolutionary era of conservative peasants and religious reactionaries, standing in the way of the revolutionary influence of socialism (Chandler, 2004). It was only in the post-Stalinist period, when the soldiers and workers of the revolutionary era were growing old, that older people emerged as a group deserving some reward for their labors. In 1956, the Soviet Union passed its first comprehensive act ensuring a state retirement pension at the age of 60 for all its citizens, providing a new, solid civic and economic position for older people. The position of retirees continued to improve during the postwar Soviet era, as it did elsewhere in Europe. This position was maintained through the postcommunist transition of 1991 (Chandler, 2004).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was a significant decline in living standards across most of Russia. The state pension system provided some kind of economic protection to pensioners in the first few postsocialist years, but in 1996, a significant funding crisis developed as a result of a collapse in payroll tax revenues. Pensions were not paid. The health and well-being of significant numbers of Russian pensioners suffered, and mortality rates among those older than 50 increased (Jensen & Richter, 2000). It was largely in response to this crisis that the RPP was formed. Created in 1997 as part of the general expansion of political parties, the RPP first contested the state elections in 1999, when it received just over 2.5% of the national vote. In 2003, its vote increased to 5%. Public opinion supported the party. An all-Russia opinion poll conducted in 2005, when pensioner incomes still represented less than a quarter of the national average² (R2,395 versus R10, 287 per month) (Wood, 2007), found majority

support for a pensioners' party. This support was spread across all adult age groups, with 55% of those aged 18 to 34 years, 57% of those aged 35 to 54 years, and 68% of those aged 55 and older stating that a pensioners' party was necessary (Public Opinion Foundation, 2005).

This level of popular support has continued. In local regional elections, in 2006, the RPP obtained nearly 12% of the total vote, close to that achieved by the former Communist Party. Then, in October 2006, the party made a decision to merge with two other parties—the Party of Life and the Homeland Party (Rodina)—to form a united party organization called Russia of Justice: Fatherland, Pensioners, and Life. This new party, known by its shortened name, “Just Russia,” represents the largest opposition group contesting recent national elections. The radical edge to the party has been blunted, however, by its incorporation into the ranks of the official opposition.³ Unlike the case with late previous president Boris Yeltsin, Russian pensioners did not form the core of opposition to his successor, Vladimir Putin (Kapstein & Milanovic, 1999). The pension reforms instituted by Putin's government in 2002 offered the promise of a better deal. Although there are signs that the reforms have failed dismally in improving future pensions (Maksimov, 2007), there has been some amelioration of pensioner poverty when compared to the Yeltsin era (Sveheva & Mikhailov, 2005).

What is notable about the success of the RPP is that it represents an old-fashioned demand for justice for the poor. In the postsocialist era, pensioners became the face of the poor in Russia, experiencing a level of poverty that directly affected their life chances. This has affected not only pensioners but also other family members who previously received financial transfers from them (Jensen & Richter, 2000). The pensions crisis did not represent a future risk that future generations must face, but a crisis directly affecting those already on fixed incomes, who were no longer in a position to restore their incomes through a reviving economy. The RPP in that sense echoes past pensioner movements in the West that sought to alleviate the poverty that immiserated and shortened people's adult lives.

The position of the RPP can be contrasted with that of AARP in the United States, an organization that has focused relatively sparingly on the needs of the elderly poor. Indeed, AARP can be viewed less as an advocacy organization and more as a consumers' movement whose concern is for the great American middle classes. It is also “by far the biggest lobbying group in the country” (Morris, 1996, p. 4), with an annual \$500 million turnover and a membership second only to that of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. By refusing to ally itself with any particular party and by persisting in addressing retired people as “citizen consumers,” AARP has achieved a degree of political influence over the rights of retired people in a way that European-style pensioner parties have not (Scarborough, 2000). Besides providing numerous discounted services, ranging from most forms of insurance to Internet service provision and online pharmacy services,

AARP offers something extra to its potential customers: “representation in Washington, DC, and in your local state” (AARP, 2005).

Alongside this commitment of exercising political influence “on behalf of our members and their families,” AARP supports a broad health and life-style agenda, offering advice, information, and a range of services to a large and generally non-frail and non-poor constituency of people self-identifying with a “50 plus” demographic (AARP, 2004). Given such a broad remit, it is hardly surprising that the organization supports a diversity of lifestyles, mixing consumerism with civic-mindedness. If there is any single overarching identity to be found within the organization and its membership, it is a shared resistance to any and all age-defined identities. Given its promarket orientation, AARP is in many ways the antithesis of a social movement. It does not claim that people in later life are oppressed nor does it represent later life as a period of material, social, or cultural impoverishment. It promotes the opposite. Even its support for the U.S. Social Security system, “a monetary cushion for grandmothers and granddads [and] a lifeline for widows, widowers, divorcees, orphans, and people with disabilities” (AARP, 2005), can be understood in terms of ensuring that the majority of people in later life continue to have the opportunity to consume, a position that reflects Roosevelt’s original purpose in passing the Social Security Act (Graebner, 1980). Similarly, its influential role in the politics of health care (cf. Street, 1993) can be viewed in terms of a consumerist advocacy model, since health care in the United States, unlike in Europe, represents a priced commodity with differential levels of entry.

In short, AARP lobbies to ensure that those older than 50 remain a constituency deserving a place in the wider market and that AARP itself continues to command a large section of that market. Elsewhere, in Europe, attempts to transform their own old-age advocacy groups into successful players in the “gray market” have proved remarkably unsuccessful. Britain’s leading old-age charitable body, Age Concern, set up a subsidiary company, Heyday, in 2004 to capitalize on the baby boomer market. Within 3 years, it proved to be a major failure, leading to staff redundancies and the resignation of senior directors (Revill, 2007). Turning from advocacy to marketing may be no easier for NGOs than is switching from a politics of redistribution to one of recognition, and for very similar reasons.

CONCLUSION

In post-1960s Western society, old age has not succeeded as a political identity in the way that race, gender, or ethnicity has, nor has it become a major single issue in the way that the environment or immigration has. The pensioner movements of the first half of the 20th century have left few successors, with the possible exception of the RPP as noted above. In fact, the

political influence of old-age interest groups has receded rather than increased (Binstock, 2000; Scarborough, 2000), despite claims to the contrary (Walker, 1998). Three reasons have been put forward to account for this anomaly: first, the inadequacy of age to serve as a collective identity through which to demand cultural and social rights; second, the dominance of labor interests in conflicts over public sector provision for old age; and third, the relative affluence of people of pensionable age that has reversed earlier processes that institutionalized old age.

The success of AARP in the United States and the more limited success of the RPP in Russia only highlight this more general failure to sustain a politics of old age in other countries. The redistribution policies that dominated the first half of the 20th century sought to eliminate poverty and reduce the disparities in earning and expenditure across the life span. They seem to be less vital concerns for contemporary electorates exposed to very different images of poverty and retirement. At the same time, the politics of recognition has thrived on imagery that derives in large part from a youthful rejection of all that is old. Signs of ageism can be detected within both the women's (MacDonald, 1986) and the disability movements (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005). Radical Islam frequently decries the conservatism and passivity of the elders in its communities, while the gay rights movement has been criticized for its focus on youth (Gilbert, 2000; Worthington, 2009).

Despite their growing numbers, people older than 60 commonly experience a kind of social and cultural invisibility. Just as skin lightening creams conveyed a sense of racism, privileging light over dark skin, so antiaging creams are seen as privileging youth over age. Just as minority ethnic groups tended to appear rarely and in caricatured form in Western media, so the media provides a small and limited range of potential identities and lifestyles for older people. Many of the forms of "oppression" visited upon minorities that "impair [. . . people] in their positive understanding of self" (Honneth, 1992, p. 189) are equally evident in the experiences of older people in Western societies. It is not that older people are "poor old people," or that they lack the physical and material capital to be socially included (the central themes of old-age advocacy groups across Europe and beyond); it is their potential for marginalization by the state and the market that constitutes the greater and more common injustice. It remains to be seen, however, whether this common situation can be challenged by the identity possibilities of age.

NOTES

1. Although some European authors have claimed that "the political participation of older people in Europe is developing fast" (Evers & Wolf, 1999, p. 60), a broader review makes clear "the failure among older people . . . to affiliate themselves to one homogeneous group known as 'older people,'" noting that "older people do not desire the label of a 'party for older people'" (Naegele & Walker, 1999, p. 203).

2. Data reported in Wood, 2007, pp. 54–55.

3. This reflects similar processes observed in Western Europe in countries such as Austria, Germany, and Sweden, where the large political parties have incorporated “age” by “creat[ing] their own sections for older people” (Nagele & Walker, 1999, p. 203).

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