German Historical Institute London
Bulletin

Conference Report: *The Politics of Old Age: Old People and Ageing in British and European History (Middle Ages to the Present)*

by Christina von Hodenberg

CONFERENCE REPORT

The Politics of Old Age: Old People and Ageing in British and European History (Middle Ages to the Present). Conference organized by the German Association for British Studies (Arbeitskreis Großbritannienforschung, AGF) in co-operation with the German Historical Institute London and Sorbonne University Faculty of Arts and Humanities, held online on 7 and 8 May 2021. Conveners: Professor Frédérique Lachaud (Sorbonne), Dr Wencke Meteling (Philipps University of Marburg/AGF), and Dr Jenny Pleinen (GHIL).

The conference took a comparative and diachronic approach in order to understand the place of old age in politics, as well as the evolution of political discourses on ageing. As Frédérique Lachaud (Sorbonne) argued in her opening remarks, recent debates on global warming and Brexit have put a spotlight on the disproportionate political power of elderly voters, who make choices for the wider population. Thus the discourse on the aged and politics has widened beyond the usual topoi: the economic insecurity of the elderly, the financial burdens of geriatric care, and fears of shrinking economic innovation due to an ageing population. Citing examples from medieval scholarly manuscripts, treatises, and speculum literature, Lachaud showed that divisive controversies over old age and power go back at least to the early Middle Ages. She then contrasted these early debates with the contentious negotiations during the 1980s and 1990s about the productivity required of retirees, at a time when the neo-liberal paradigm of so-called 'active ageing' began to replace post-war notions of well deserved retirement or *Ruhestand* (French: *état de repos*) throughout Western Europe.

In her keynote lecture, Pat Thane (King's College London) gave an overview of representations of old age in twentieth-century Britain, noting that a problematic old age was long perceived as a condition of the poor, and that stereotypical perceptions and age discrimination persisted until at least 2010. The elderly were largely seen as male, frail, and

less deserving of the National Health Service's treatment than younger cohorts. State pensions were lower than in Germany, and the provision of social care for the fourth age was a problem not tackled by successive governments. Although from the 1950s onwards social scientists such as Peter Townsend and Michael Young exposed the plight of the elderly poor and did much to highlight the hidden contributions of the old to the national economy and intergenerational welfare, political discrimination continued. The stark inequalities between different subgroups of seniors—rich and poor, men and women, the fit and the frail—were further exacerbated by the turn of public debate towards 'active and productive ageing' at the end of the twentieth century.

The first section of the conference was dedicated to medieval attitudes towards the elderly. Amelia Jennie Kennedy (Yale University) examined how Cistercian monastic communities in thirteenth-century Europe dealt with older abbots and abbatial retirement. While ageing abbots in the twelfth century often faced pressure to remain in office, their counterparts in the thirteenth century were encouraged to step down if they developed an age-related illness or disability. This shift in attitude resulted from the growing bureaucratization of the Cistercian order, particularly the growth of the Cistercian general chapter and increasing emphasis on regular attendance at chapter meetings. Drawing on general chapter statutes *c.*1180–1300 and the *Liber formularius*, an abbatial manual produced in the thirteenth century, Kennedy also showed that 'retired' abbots were expected to maintain some form of productivity—for example by engaging in scholarly pursuits. Elisa Mantienne (University of Lorraine) followed with a paper on elderly abbots in English Benedictine monasteries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Taking the example of three abbots of St Albans (Thomas de la Mare, John Moot, and John Whethamstede), she stressed that domestic chronicles presented old age mainly as an asset because experience and maturity grew with age. When an abbot was absent or incapacitated, large houses were run by numerous monastic officials under the supervision of the prior. But while the administration of the community and their lands would carry on, increasing illness and senility brought difficulties in regard to the position of the monastery in public life.

The second session looked at examples from Venice and Slovenia between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Christian Alexander

Neumann (German Historical Institute Rome) discussed attitudes towards ageing doges in the early modern Republic of Venice. Treatises on the Venetian constitution mainly conveyed a positive image of old age. Increased wisdom, prudence, and long experience made older candidates better suited to hold political power than young men who threatened the stability of the state. By the fourteenth century, the election of old men to the office of doge was well established. Many of the election criteria could only be achieved at an advanced age, such as wealth, a long *cursus honorum*, proven loyalty to the republic, and experience. But Neumann then presented the case of Doge Agostino Barbarigo (born 1419, reigned 1486–1501) who during his last years was much criticized because of his age, 'monarchical' behaviour, and frequent political and military failures. Neumann concluded that positive and negative stereotypes of old age were available and that both were used in contemporary debates, depending on political expediency.

Nataša Henig Miščič (Institute of Contemporary History, Ljubljana) approached the topic from an economic perspective. She examined how the Carniolan Savings Bank—the first, central financial institution in the Slovenian territory, founded in 1820 and based in Ljubljana—contributed to the politics of old age in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in this Austrian part of the Habsburg Empire. From 1889 onwards the Carniolan Savings Bank developed special accounts for workers and employees which paid out pensions after the age of 70. These funds were meant to help overcome the hardships of old age and to encourage the lower classes to save money. They were popular with servants and workers, as archival records show.

The third session focused on images of ageing during the twentieth century in Germany and the Soviet Union. Alissa Klots (University of Pittsburgh) explored the role of retirees in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union, arguing that so far historians have interpreted the period mainly through a youth-centred generational lens while overlooking the political agency of the elderly. Yet the active role of the old went well beyond the ageing leaders of the Communist party. The introduction of universal pensions from age 55 (women) and 60 (men) created pensioners as a distinct social group and an 'entitlement community'. Of all social groups, retirees were most likely to volunteer or join public organizations such as people's guards or women's and pensioners' soviets.

While the agenda of such organizations was defined by the authorities, their policies were often appropriated by the (overwhelmingly retired) subjects whom the state sought to mobilize. Older people saw public volunteering as a way of living under the rules of the system and deriving satisfaction from it. This fitted in with Soviet scholarship, which had emphasized ideas of active and useful ageing since the 1940s, and with the public veneration of the cohorts born around the turn of the century as 'Lenin's generation'. As 'old Bolsheviks', these retirees felt entitled to feed their visions of the right path to Communism into their volunteering activities.

Lastly, Benjamin Glöckler (University of Freiburg) contrasted images of ageing in two magazines published by West and East German welfare organizations during the 1960s and 1970s. Comparing the Arbeiterwohlfahrt's *Sozialprisma* magazine with the Volkssolidarität's *Volkshelfer*, he stated that while everyday activities in social clubs for the elderly were more or less similar, attitudes towards ageing differed starkly. In the socialist East, the values of solidarity and labour were used to stage older citizens as a productive, active, and useful part of society. In the West, in contrast, *Sozialprisma* presented largely isolated, devalued, and suffering elderly people threatened by poverty and loneliness. Old age was shown as a precarious stage of life and clearly delineated from adulthood in the Federal Republic of Germany, while in the GDR adults and the elderly were held up as a team working in solidarity towards a common identity.

On both conference days, lively discussions centred on comparisons across geographical and chronological boundaries, and on the need to advance our understanding of ageing by focusing on intersections of difference. Historiographic narratives were criticized for their overwhelming focus on youth, or on successive political generations of the young. The difference between the third and fourth ages, the genesis of the paradigm of active ageing, the role of social scientists in influencing public images of ageing, and questions of intergenerational justice were also brought into focus, highlighting that much remains to be explored in this field of research.

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