

## SOCIETAL AND EXISTENTIAL ISSUES OF AGEING IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH SOCIETY

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to present an overview of the issues surrounding ageing in contemporary French society. Firstly, it sets out the issues that are at the heart of public policy and that constitute the major current orientations of old age policies. Secondly, it discusses other societal issues that are not considered by public policies. In the third part, it adopts a micro-sociological point of view to look at the existential issues of ageing for people who are getting on in years. Finally, the conclusion provides an opportunity to discuss a fourth issue, which concerns the structuring of research in the Human and Social Sciences on ageing.

**Keywords:** ageing; societal issues; existential issues; France; ageism

### **Résumé:**

Cet article vise à présenter un panorama des enjeux du vieillissement dans la société française contemporaine. Dans un premier temps, il expose les enjeux qui sont au cœur des politiques publiques et qui constituent les grandes orientations actuelles des politiques de la vieillesse. Dans un deuxième temps, il évoque d'autres enjeux sociétaux qui ne sont pas pris en compte par les politiques publiques. Dans un troisième temps, il adopte un point de vue microsociologique pour s'intéresser aux enjeux existentiels du vieillissement pour les personnes qui avancent en âge. Enfin, la conclusion est l'occasion d'évoquer un quatrième enjeu, qui concerne la structuration des recherches en Sciences Humaines et Sociales sur le vieillissement.

**Mots-clés:** vieillissement; défis sociétaux; défis existentiels; France; âgisme

### **Rezumat**

Acest articol își propune să prezinte o privire de ansamblu asupra provocărilor îmbătrânirii în societatea franceză contemporană. În primul rând, stabilește problemele care se află în centrul politicilor publice și care constituie principalele orientări actuale ale politicilor pentru limită de vârstă. În al doilea rând, el discută alte probleme sociale care nu sunt luate în considerare de politicile publice. În al treilea rând, articolul adoptă un punct de vedere microsociologic pentru a se concentra asupra problemelor existențiale ale îmbătrânirii pentru persoanele care

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avansează în vârstă. În cele din urmă, concluzia este o oportunitate de a discuta un al patrulea aspect, care se referă la structurarea cercetării în științele umane și sociale privind îmbătrânirea.

**Cuvinte cheie:** îmbătrânire; provocări societale; provocări existențiale; Franța; vârstnicism

## 1. Introduction

This article aims to present a panorama of the challenges of ageing in contemporary French society. The term 'issues' seems preferable to the term 'problems', which is often used in relation to old age (Ennuyer, 2002). The tendency to view old age as a problem is a long-standing one: the notion of 'demographic ageing' has long been associated with the idea of decline (Bourdelaïs, 1993) and the Laroque report (1962), which is considered to be the founding document of old age policy in France, was the work of a 'commission for the study of old age problems'. Yet old age and ageing, it should be emphasised, are not primarily a problem. The fact that more people are living longer than ever before is, above all, good news.

This continued life opens up a number of issues. These issues are multiple and we would like to distinguish three main types, which we propose to present in succession. Firstly, we will present the issues that are at the heart of public policy and that constitute the major current orientations of old age policies. Secondly, we will see that, beyond the issues that have been taken up by public policy, there are other societal issues that deserve to be addressed. In the third stage, we will change the level of analysis and adopt a micro-sociological point of view. We will then take an interest in people who are getting on in years and we will see that, for them, growing old opens up a whole range of existential issues. Finally, the conclusion will provide an opportunity to discuss a fourth issue, which concerns the structuring of research in the Human and Social Sciences on ageing.

## 2. The challenges of ageing at the heart of public policy

In order to present the issues of ageing at the heart of public policy, we shall draw on the analyses developed by Anne-Marie Guillemard in her socio-historical study of old age policies in France (Guillemard, 1986, 2014). She shows that these policies developed between 1945 and 1985 around three issues: the social right to retirement; the lifestyle of retired people, which led to the development of a policy oriented towards the social integration of the elderly in the 1960s and 1970s; and the participation of the elderly in production. By extending this framework of analysis to the contemporary period, it can be argued that these three issues can be found today in a slightly different form: pension reforms; long-term care policy; employment of older workers.

### *2.1. Pension reforms*

The pension system which was conceived in France after the Second World War is of the Bismarckian type and managed by a large number of pension funds. It has been at the heart of the political agenda for the last thirty years. Indeed, from the 1980s onwards, several reports alerted the public authorities to the risks of financial imbalance in the pension system, due to the fact that the number of pensioners was increasing faster than the number of working people. It should be remembered that in a pay-as-you-go pension system such as the French one, it is the contributions of working people that finance the pensions of retirees. This growth in the number of pensioners can be explained by two phenomena: on the one hand, the increase in life expectancy and, on the other hand, the arrival in retirement, from 2006 onwards, of the large generations of the baby boom which followed the end of the Second World War. It is in this context that it appeared necessary to reform the pension system in order to ensure its financial equilibrium.

Several reforms have been carried out over the past 25 years. The first, known as the Balladur reform (named after the Prime Minister at the time) dates from 1993, while a new, more structural reform has been announced for 2019 by President Macron. These reforms introduced a whole range of changes. They led to an increase in the number of years of contributions required to obtain a full pension and to a less advantageous calculation of retirement pensions (even if pensioners in France remain rather well off, their average standard of living remaining, for the moment, equivalent to that of working people). They have pushed back the legal retirement age, or rather the retirement ages since there are, in fact, several: 62, the age at which it is possible to retire (in the general scheme), but with a 'discount' (i.e. a penalty) for those who have not contributed enough; 67, the age at which it is possible to retire without a discount (i.e. without a penalty); and 70, the age beyond which the employer has the right to put an employee on compulsory retirement. At the same time, these reforms have made it easier to combine a retirement pension with a job - something that was almost impossible in France in the 1980s. As a result, we are now seeing an increase in the number of retirees in this situation, either because of their attachment to work or for financial reasons. This trend towards combining work and retirement could become even more pronounced with the pension reform announced by Emmanuel Macron, the principle of which consists of introducing a points-based system which, in theory, gives greater latitude of choice as to when to retire, once the minimum age has been reached.

Beyond these aspects, these reforms raise a number of questions. We will mention four of them. The first is the extent to which a section of the population, which started working early and has experienced difficult working conditions, can continue to work beyond the age of 60. That's why the hardship of past jobs is beginning to be taken into account in determining the time of retirement. The second issue is that of social inequalities in the length of life in retirement, due to inequalities in the face of death (there is a 7-year difference in life expectancy at

age 35 between an unskilled worker and a senior executive) and in health. This double inequality is well summarised in an article entitled “A double disadvantage for manual workers: more years of disability and a shorter life expectancy” (Cambois, Laborde, Robine, 2008). Following on from the two previous points, a third question should be raised: that of the social inequalities at work in the combination of work and retirement. Indeed, those who plan to work beyond the legal retirement age tend to be managers or professionals, whereas many people from working-class backgrounds do not wish to do so (even if they are sometimes forced by their limited resources). For the former, retirement can be experienced as discrimination, when they are forced to take it when they were fulfilled in their work, whereas for the latter, it is a protection that should allow them to stop working after hard years of work (Caradec, Lefrançois, Poli, 2009). Finally, these reforms raise a fourth question: that of the social meaning of retirement time. From this point of view, whereas in the 1970s and 1980s retirement had become a desirable time of life, associated with leisure and self-fulfilment, it now appears, at least for part of the population, as a time of financial uncertainty and anxiety.

## *2.2. Long-term care policy*

A second public policy issue concerns what is now known in France as 'dependency', i.e. the care of elderly people who need help with certain tasks in daily life: cleaning, shopping, even dressing, washing or feeding themselves. For a long time, this care remained invisible because it was considered to be the responsibility of families, and it was only in the 1980s and 1990s that it became a public issue, which led to the introduction of an allowance, the APA (Allocation Personnalisée d'Autonomie), in 2002. This allowance, which today has 1.3 million beneficiaries over 60 years of age, aims to finance (at least in part) the professionals who help them at home or in French nursing homes, which are called EHPAD (Etablissement d'Hébergement pour Personnes Agées Dépendantes). Four points can be made about this dependency policy.

Firstly, it is aimed exclusively at people aged 60 and over. People under 60 who need help are covered by another policy: the disability policy. This distinction between dependency policy (for the over-60s) and disability policy (for the under-60s) is criticised by a number of stakeholders, who call for a single policy to support independence regardless of age, as exists in other European countries (Weber, 2011).

Secondly, there is the question of the financial resources that need to be devoted to dependency. 30 billion (or 1.4% of GDP), three-quarters of which is financed by the public authorities and a quarter directly by households (Roussel, 2017). But this funding is insufficient, particularly in EHPADs, where there are too few staff, which has negative repercussions on the quality of support - a theme that has recently emerged in public debate. A national consultation on old age and autonomy was launched on this subject in October 2018 by the Ministry of Solidarity and Health and should result in a bill in 2019.

Thirdly, it should be pointed out that over the last ten years, particular emphasis has been placed on one particular type of dependency, that due to cognitive disorders. Alzheimer's disease and related disorders were declared a major national cause in 2007 by President Sarkozy and provided with significant financial resources.

Finally, it can be said that the dependency policy has recently been enriched with two new components. The first concerns the prevention of dependency. It takes the form of a policy known as „ageing well", which is aimed more at the 50-70 year-olds, who are encouraged to adopt a series of behaviours in order to avoid - or delay - dependency: eating a balanced diet; developing physical activity; taking part in screening activities; maintaining an active social life. The second part is aimed at the „carers" of dependent elderly people, i.e. their relatives, mainly their spouse and children. It is estimated that there are currently 800,000 carers of dependent elderly people living at home and studies have shown that the significant investment of some of them has negative repercussions on their free time and their health (Soullier, 2012; Davin, Paraponaris, 2014). They are therefore now considered as collateral victims of dependency situations. This is why a range of measures have been created for them: training (mainly for carers of people with Alzheimer's disease); measures to reconcile work and assistance (such as leave for close carers); and respite care (such as day centres or temporary accommodation).

### *2.3. Employment of older workers*

The third issue for French age-related public policies concerns the level of employment of older people, in the sense of 55-64 year old: in the 1970s and 1980s, France, much more than other countries, had recourse to early retirement as well as to other measures for early exit from the labour market, such as unemployment benefits until retirement age, without any obligation to look for a job. It has thus developed what Anne-Marie Guillemard has called the 'culture of early exit' from the labour market (Guillemard, 2010). Since the beginning of the 2000s, France has been trying to move away from this culture of early exit by pursuing a policy opposite to that of the 1970s and 1980s. The watchword is now to increase the number of older people in employment. This change in public policy orientation is a 180-degree turn, which owes much to the commitments made by France at the European level and which is in line with the pension reforms. The success of these reforms presupposes increased participation of older people in the labour market, since only those in employment pay social contributions.

This third issue appears to be less burning today than it was four or five years ago. Even if the employment rate of older people remains below the European average (57%), it has increased significantly over the last fifteen years, from 37% (in 2003) to 51% (in 2017). However, the culture of early exit has not completely disappeared, as shown by the difficulties encountered by people in their fifties who have lost their jobs in order to find new ones.

### 3. Three other societal challenges

In addition to these issues, which have been taken up by public policies, there are others which are also societal issues, but which are not taken into account very much by public policies. We will present three of these issues: breaking with ageism; living together in a multigenerational society; and creating a culture of old age.

#### 3.1. *Breaking with ageism*

The first issue is how to break with „ageism”, a term that refers to representations and attitudes of depreciation or inattention towards the elderly. This concept, coined by analogy with racism, is intended to draw attention to the very negative representations of old age that prevail in our society and that have become more pronounced since the beginning of the 19th century (Ng et al, 2015).

Ageism manifests itself in many ways. It is at work, for example, against people in their fifties who lose their jobs and do not find new ones because they are deemed incapable of adapting because of their age. It is also, and above all, expressed against older people, who sometimes feel that they have no place, that they are disturbing or no longer exist in the eyes of others, that they have become invisible and incompetent simply because they are old. It is also reflected in poorly adapted urban facilities, for example the absence or inadequacy of public benches, or insufficient time for elderly pedestrians to cross the road. It is also ageism that allows us to say things about the „old” that we do not or no longer allow ourselves to say about other discriminated or stigmatised categories. Thus, in the 19th century and up until a few decades ago, the „child referent” was used to refer not only to the old, but also to women or blacks: „old people are becoming children again”, „women are like children” or „blacks are eternal children”, as people used to say to emphasise their inferiority. These last two analogies have disappeared, while the analogy persists for the elderly, as Cédric Humbert has shown (Humbert, 2015). Thus, in some nursing homes, residents are considered as 'children without a future' and capricious (Loffeier, 2015).

#### 3.2. *Living together in a multigenerational society*

A second societal issue concerns living together in a multigenerational society. Indeed, the major contemporary demographic upheaval in Western societies is no longer just demographic ageing (i.e. the increase in the proportion of the population aged 60 and over), but what demographers sometimes call 'ageing within ageing': the increase in the number of very old people. In metropolitan France, for example, the 85+ age group, which accounted for 0.5% of the population in 1950, is 3.2% in 2018 and is expected to represent 7.5% of the population in 2050. The number of centenarians has risen from 200 in 1950 to 16,000 in 2018 and is expected to reach 140,000 in 2050. At the same time, even though the increase in disability-free life expectancy slowed down in the 2000s compared with the previous two decades, more and more people are reaching old age in relatively good health.

This is an unprecedented phenomenon. Never before in the history of humanity has there been a society with such a demographic balance, such a diversity of ages and such a large number of people of advanced age. This new reality raises a whole series of questions. Firstly, it raises questions about the organisation of life courses and leads to the question of how training, work and free time should be distributed throughout life (Guillemard, 2010). Secondly, it raises questions about the social role of older people in our society and the place they can occupy in it. Finally, it invites us to ask the question of relations between generations in a society marked by a strong division of ages and in which, outside the family, people of very different ages have few spaces in which they could rub shoulders, meet and develop mutual knowledge and an understanding of what we might call age otherness. This last aspect is undoubtedly a major challenge, which the intergenerational projects that have been developed in recent years are trying to meet.

#### **4. The creation of a culture of old age**

A third societal challenge concerns the creation of a culture of old age. This notion refers to the work of the psychologist Paul Baltes. According to him, very old people have an enemy on the one hand: their biological equipment, which deteriorates over time. On the other hand, they have a possible ally: the social and cultural environment, which can ensure more favourable living conditions and help them to make sense of their lives (Baltes, 1997). From this point of view, a major collective challenge is the invention of cultural models of ageing and living in old age, which can give meaning to this last period of life.

The generations that are reaching old age today, and who are in a way pioneers of this age of life, have begun to grasp this issue. The collective initiatives that are emerging bear witness to this. This is the case of self-managed housing projects, best exemplified by the Babayagas project in Montreuil. It is also the case of the Old Up association, which brings together octogenarians and nonagenarians and whose objective is to 'give meaning and utility to the extension of life', according to the association's motto (Savona-Chignier, 2017).

In the creation of this culture of old age, a central issue is to succeed in creating and disseminating images of old age other than that of decline, and in particular the idea that, even when one is very old, it is possible to discover and learn. This idea can be illustrated by quoting an interview given by the French actor Michel Galabru in 2010, when he was 87 years old and still making films: „At 40, I was not mature. Now I have the strange sensation of waking up. I am discovering how to act, how to be real. At 87, I'm on the verge of a hole, and I say to myself that it's a pity, I'm starting to understand my job better” (Le Monde, 4 August 2010). Another illustration comes from the testimony of an 83-year-old woman, whom we met as part of a research project on couples who form in retirement homes. This woman recounts having discovered the pleasure of clitoral orgasms with her new partner and adds that she is more fulfilled in her sexual life today than she was in the past (Sinoquet, 2015). This idea of possible

lifelong learning, even in old age, seems essential - and is also a way to fight ageism.

## **5. The existential challenges of ageing**

The question of the constitution of a culture of old age and the reflection on the meaning of growing old make the link with the third part of our discussion, which concerns the individual and existential issues of growing old. These issues arise when people who are getting older are faced with difficulties that increase in probability with age. These difficulties are partly due to physiological and psychological changes: health problems and functional limitations, the fact that we tire more quickly, and an increased awareness of our finitude. They can also be explained by changes in the human and material environment of older people: the disappearance of some of their contemporaries; relatives who sometimes become overprotective; an outside world that becomes less welcoming because of ageism. Based on several surveys conducted among people in their 70s, 80s and 90s (Caradec, 2004, 2014), we can identify four individual issues related to growing old. They relate respectively to maintaining a grip on the world, decision-making autonomy, preserving one's social value and familiarity with the world.

### *5.1. The issue of control over the world*

The first issue relates to the question of what people do as they age when, because of the difficulties they encounter, they can no longer continue to do what they did before. Empirical research (Barthe, Clément, Drulhe, 1988; Caradec, 2007) shows a process of reconversion of activities, that French sociologists have called 'déprise': people who have to give up some activities try to replace them with others (for example, they watch mass on television when they can no longer go to church) and they try to keep, for as long as possible, those activities that are most important to them. To illustrate this last point, we can cite the example of a nonagenarian woman who had lost the use of one eye and could not see well in the other, and who had given up watching television in the afternoon so that she could continue to watch the early evening series and what she called her 'television friends'. Indeed, this appointment was a daily pleasure for her, renewed every day. It also happens that some people, forced to reorganise their lives, engage in new activities, even at an advanced age, as in the case of the Chinese cartoonist Rao Pingru, who began to write and draw at the age of 85, after the death of his wife, to tell the story of his life.

For older people, the challenge of this conversion process is to maintain for as long as possible, or even to recreate, activities and social links that are meaningful to them, i.e. meaningful ways of dealing with the world. However, the difficulties they encounter are unevenly distributed, as are the resources for dealing with them. Some people, even the very elderly, have few functional limitations and continue to be called upon, while others face multiple difficulties. The latter are then forced to reorganise their lives to such an extent that they



sometimes abandon activities that are essential to them, to the point where boredom invades their daily lives. Similarly, certain important social ties break down with the death of loved ones (spouse, friends) without it always being possible to replace them.

### *5.2. The challenge of autonomous decision-making*

At the same time, the probability of experiencing functional limitations, and therefore of becoming 'frail' or even 'dependent', increases with age (Lalivie d'Epinay, Spini, 2008). Even though many very old people continue to carry out the basic activities of daily life by themselves, or even have no or few functional limitations (Cambois, Robine, 2003), more and more of them are dependent on relatives or professionals to carry out a range of daily tasks: housework, shopping, toileting, etc. This raises the question of how to maintain their autonomy (if by autonomy we mean the ability to decide for oneself on matters concerning one's own life) in situations in which their dependence on others (in the sense of needing help in daily life) becomes more acute.

In this respect, two opposite postures can be distinguished. In the first, old people try to preserve their autonomy as much as possible and deploy a range of strategies to do so. Some hide events from their relatives in order to prevent them from intervening further (for example, they don't tell about a fall for not having a remote alarm imposed). Others refuse the home help provided for in the assistance plans set up by the Departmental Council's medical-social teams when this help is not suitable for them and interferes with their autonomy. Still others, who live in EHPAD, contest the prescriptions that the institution tries to impose on them in terms of hygiene, food or medication, or refuse to participate in collective activities (Mallon, 2004). The second position, on the other hand, is that of people who have given up their autonomy, who now rely on others and allow themselves to be carried along by their children or professionals, developing a kind of indifference to things. This is what a 104-year-old man expressed, for example, when talking about his daughter: 'She gave me something to drink, I don't know what it is, but it's good' (Vantorre, 2010). This can also be observed in retirement homes when residents refuse the incentives to autonomy advocated by staff (who suggest, for example, that they try to dress themselves) and prefer to be taken care of. And the same type of attitude has been noted among some people with Alzheimer's disease, encountered when they were in an early or moderate stage of the disease (Chamahian, Caradec, 2017).

### *5.3. The challenge of preserving one's social value*

With advancing age, the question arises of how to preserve one's self-esteem, the feeling of one's own value. It happens in particular when old people have to give up activities (and especially when they have to give up activities important for them), as well as when external views tend to consider them only as an old person (and thus to reduce them to the identity of an old person).

The question here is whether people can anchor their sense of worth in the present (who they are today) or whether they can only do so by reference to the past (who they have been). From this point of view, it can be said that it is possible to establish one's self-esteem in the present under certain conditions. This implies continuing to do things that are of value to oneself or to others. This may be seemingly small things, such as continuing to look after one's house or garden. Or, alternatively, it may involve the positive regard and recognition of those close to us, which can compensate for the generally negative view of the elderly in our society.

## **6. The challenge of familiarity with the world**

As people grow older, their sense of belonging to the world tends to become problematic: very old people often feel that they no longer have a real place in today's rapidly changing society, and they find it increasingly difficult to understand the world, which tends not to understand them any more. Amongst various testimonies from research interviews or from the diaries of very old writers (Puijalon-Veysset, 1999), let us quote the words of Claude Levi-Strauss who declared, at the age of 96: "We are in a world to which I no longer belong. The one I knew, the one I loved, had 1.5 billion inhabitants. Today's world has 6 billion people. It is no longer mine" (Le Monde, 22 February 2005).

This difficulty in adhering to today's society is forged through a number of mechanisms. Thus, the disappearance of contemporaries who have lived through the same periods as oneself, with whom there was a connivance and who 'understood you halfway' (Clément, 2000) plays a major role in the construction of this feeling. Other mechanisms also contribute to this, in particular changes in the environment. Think, for example, of technological developments, changes in school and university courses that make it difficult to identify the studies followed by grandchildren or great-grandchildren, or changes in the urban environment that make people feel like strangers in their town or neighbourhood.

Faced with this increasing strangeness of the world, people who are ageing can implement two opposing strategies to recreate familiarity with their environment. The first is to fight against this strangeness. This is how we meet people who have converted to new technologies, seeing it as a way to 'stay in the game'. The second strategy, on the other hand, consists of withdrawing into a close, familiar and secure space, which counteracts the strangeness and insecurity of the outside world. This space is the home. Many very old people value their home, which is, to use Bernadette Veysset's (1989) formula, both a refuge and a landmark: a refuge where they feel protected from outside aggression; a landmark in terms of identity (the home symbolises the continuity of the person), space (it is a familiar, intimately appropriate space, the use of which is strongly anchored in bodily habits) and time (because it is full of memories). The objects in the domestic environment therefore play a major role: through their presence, they ensure the permanence of the world surrounding the individual and thus enable him or her to perpetuate a feeling of stability, whereas outside, everything

is changing. Indeed, it is by surrounding themselves with material objects - familiar furniture and knick-knacks, photographs of their loved ones, living or dead - that people entering a retirement home sometimes manage to recreate a 'home' and regain a certain balance (Mallon, 2004).

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude this article, we would like to mention a fourth issue, which concerns research in the human and social sciences on ageing. This research must take up the challenge of shedding light on the issues we have just presented. From this point of view, we have seen the beginning of a structuring of research on ageing in recent years. This is the case at European level with, for example, the Joint Programme Initiative "More Years, Better Lives". This is also the case at national level with the creation, at the beginning of 2018, of the Institute of Longevity, Elderly and Ageing (ILVV – Institut de la Longévité, des Vieillesse et du Vieillessement), which aims to bring together all the research forces in the French Human and Social Sciences and to facilitate multidisciplinary dialogue and partnerships, both at international level and between the world of research and public decision makers.

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