

Ageing and Rejuvenation: no Room for Adults?

Più Vecchi, Meno Giovani: e gli Adulti?

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Riassunto: l'invecchiamento della popolazione viene associato alla durata della vita, all'aumento della speranza di vita ed alla caduta della fecondità. Tale fenomeno ha notevoli implicazioni sui sistemi pensionistici nei paesi europei: questa è senz'altro una delle sue conseguenze più immediate e visibili. Ma allo stesso tempo si vive meglio e più a lungo: a significare che l'invecchiamento biologico e quello demografico vanno in direzioni opposte. Ciò dovrebbe implicare una revisione delle misure statistico-demografiche dell'invecchiamento, per tener conto di apparenti divergenze causate dall'evoluzione della durata della vita umana. Definizioni di strutture demografiche, limiti delle classi di età e classi di età stesse necessitano dunque di essere rimessi in discussione.

Keywords: ageing, counter ageing, work, retirement.

1. Ageing

Population ageing is a consequence of changing probability of death at mature ages, of increased life expectancy and of the drop in the number of births and in the fertility rate. This has implications for Europe as a whole, although there are differences among countries.

Population ageing is, in fact, the outcome of deliberate behaviour, of decisions by couples and societies: a success per se. The United Nations Second World Assembly on Ageing held in Madrid in 2002 referred to an unprecedented, universal, large-scale, lasting, irreversible and rapid phenomenon.

Looking at the future evolution of over 65 years old people in the European Union we notice that this percentage has increased fast during the 1980s and the 1990s till reaching 18% in Italy. According to the United Nations population forecasts (medium variant) in many European countries about 30% of the population will be aged more than 65 years in 2050. Italian population will be the most affected from the ageing process: old people percentage will almost double till reaching 36% of the total population within 50 years. (table 1) And the 65 and over persons are currently the more exposed to social exclusion in developed societies: population at scrapping risk (popolazione a rischio di rottamazione) according to an Italian approach and an language.

Level and speed are also important factors: a speeding-up of ageing may occur even if the proportion of elderly persons increases only slightly. But looking at the age pyramids of many European countries, the number of elderly people is already alarming for those societies even before the year 2020 arrives. The present welfare system is thus totally unsustainable in demographic terms.

In this situation, what should be changed? The 2020 population has already been born and we know it will live a long time: the biological clock is now set at 120 years, life expectancy is more than 80 years for women and nearly for men in some countries.

Of course, everyone is delighted that at 60-65 years, until recently the age at which people died, one can still expect another 15 years of life or more. However, although biological ageing is being postponed, social ageing appears to be being brought forward, not just as regards retirement age but also as regards liberation of the individual from the most important economic and social duties: working and caring for children. The population is ageing but the elderly of tomorrow will be less and less old. Europe should have a true cultural revolution. We must rethink the concept of old age in order to allow for those changes being conscious that the real phenomenon is not the ageing of population but the ageing of ageing.

2. Counter ageing

According to the World Health Organization, active ageing is the process whereby an individual optimises his potential to attain physical, social and mental well-being throughout his life, in order to live for as long as possible in good health, to remain productive and to preserve his quality of life during the last part of his existence. Therefore the European welfare system should provide a standard of living that offers all that to future pensioners but without an excessive exploitation of the contributory capacity of younger generations. In addition, nowadays individuals make a much larger number of years of life available to society.

Hence, we are witnessing a double movement involving the expansion and the compression of years of life: expansion, in which the number of people living till an advanced age increases rapidly and strongly; compression, in which the total number of years lived in a lifetime increases in the same way.

If in 20 years the median lifetime of a population rises from 30 to 45 years, the immediate consequence is that 15 generations of adults would move from the less young half of the population to the younger half. This is what is happening in many European countries, giving a picture of biological rejuvenation together with demographic ageing. In the European Union in 1979 the median lifetime was 33 years; in 2020 it will be 44 (figure 1): consequently eleven generations of adults are in a rejuvenation process.

A rejuvenation or counter-ageing society is appearing, if we consider the biological aspect. At the same time we talk about population ageing referring to the demographic aspect; and from this point of view we need a demographic amnesty (*sanatoria demografica*) with the transfers of the “old” 65-75 people to the adult population.

Technically speaking, many generations regarded as old in 1980 are now seen as young. In pension terms, we can't treat those generations as we treated elderly persons 20 years ago. This is the challenge that our institutions are facing nowadays.

Those kind of challenges will make more and more necessary new social policies: in fact population ageing and changing family's structures imply the rethinking of family, labour and retirement policies.

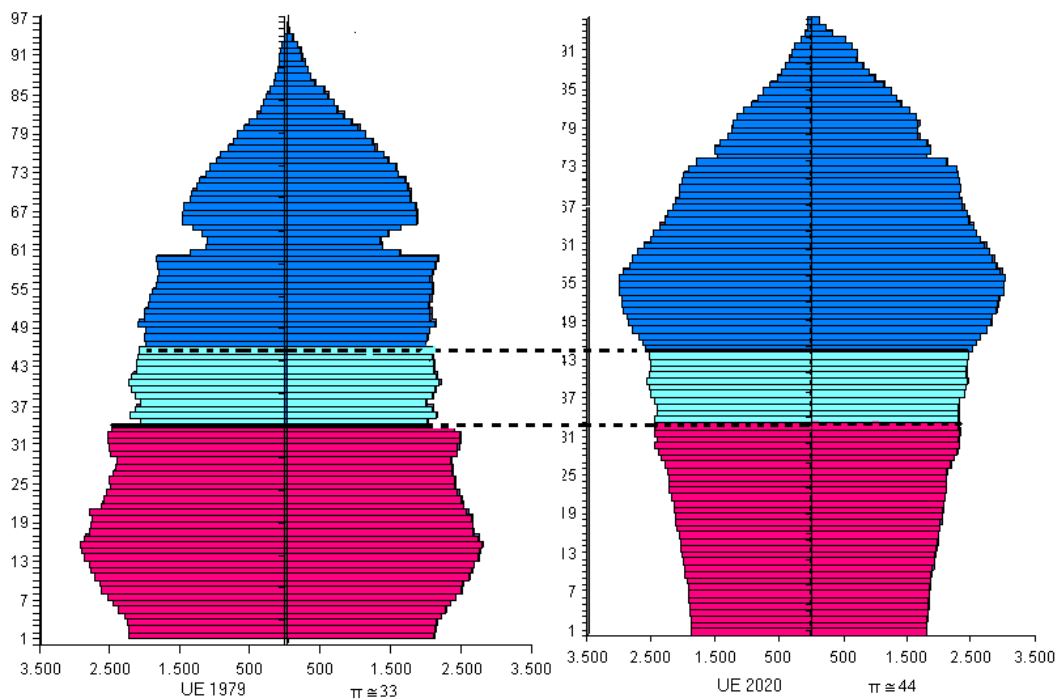
If we look at the young side, we can state that the teenage period has become longer than in the past. Young people are in effect more and more assisted from the welfare state: they receive familiar and social transfers (e.g. scholarships) to be more specialized in the labour market and to prevent, or better to fill, a period of unemployment.

Table 1: *Population over 65 years, EU 2000-2050.*

	2000	2015	2030	2050
Belgium	16,7	19,9	26	29
Denmark	14,8	19,5	24,2	25,9
Germany	16,2	21	27,7	31
Greece	17,3	21,2	26,2	34,1
Spain	16,9	19,8	26,5	37,6
France	16,1	18,6	23,8	26,7
Ireland	11,2	13,1	16,9	21,9
Italia	18,2	22,4	28,6	35,9
Luxembourg	14,3	16,1	19,5	19,7
Holland	13,6	17,8	24,2	26,5
Austria	15,5	20	27,9	34
Portugal	15,6	18	22,5	29,8
Finland	15	20,7	26,7	27,9
Sweden	17,2	22,3	27	30,3
United Kingdom	15,6	18,9	24,3	27,3

Source: United Nations

Figure 1: *Age pyramids and median age, European Union 1979 and 2020*



Source: Eurostat

To reach an economic independence from their family and to form new families, young people would need a starting salary impossible to obtain today. This would be necessary to preserve the economic status they experienced in their family. This is unfortunately unthinkable at present time: the first employment and the financing of the whole amount of young people occupation became too heavy to support for our welfare-state systems.

That's why it is important the role and the economic intervention of families to finance young people education. Parents and families are consequently the most important entrepreneurs in the industrialized world. And young people may be considered as quasi-pensioners!

Today we hear often the concept of full employment, that means to work all the day long, even if in the future the time dedicated to work is previewed to be reduced to employ more people. But in the future the myth of the full employment will be replaced from that of under employment. It means that people will have more and more time to spend in their personal activities (e.g. familiar, social, non commercial...) that to work in the traditional meaning of the term.

Conclusion

The counter ageing of population structure that we described in our note should be accompanied by a counter ageing of ideas and traditions. If we move the entry threshold in the old age we find a rejuvenation of the population (Giarini, 2000): the active population for instance could change from the well known age group 18-65, to the age group 18-70 or 18-75. That will imply a gain of 5 or 10 years!

The UN Report about Replacement Migration (2000) talked about an upper limit needing to be raised to roughly 75 years and Avramov and Maskova (2003) defined the age group 60-79 as young old to distinguish it from the oldest old group.

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