

## **The dissolution of adult life and youth as a value**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Three intertwined social processes give a special configuration to the dissolution of adult life in contemporary societies. (1) the extension of the age range of the young segment of the population; (2) the creation of new categories to demarcate the later stages of the life cycle 3) the transformation of youth into a commodity, a value that should be attained at any stage of life through the adoption of adequate forms of consumption and lifestyles. Based on how these changes are represented in the media and analyzed in the academic literature, the central argument is that the adulthood acquires different meanings in contemporary Brazilian hierarchical society: when referring to the privileged sectors of our society that figure indicates a "failed consumer" who are incapable of adopting appropriate lifestyles and forms of consumption targeted at ensuring youthfulness; when referring to the poor it indicates a sort of "unattainable fantasy", because the poor are discriminated as individuals unable to reach a stage characterized by maturity, responsibility and commitment.

**Keywords:** adulthood, life course, life cycle, lifestyles and consumer.

### **RESUMO**

Três processos inter-relacionados dão uma configuração específica à dissolução da vida adulta nas sociedades contemporâneas: 1) o alargamento da faixa etária do segmento considerado jovem da população; 2) o desdobramento das etapas mais avançadas do ciclo da vida em novas categorias etárias; 3) a transformação da juventude em um valor, que pode ser conquistado em qualquer etapa da vida através da adoção de formas de consumo e estilos de vida adequados. Com base no modo como essas mudanças são representadas na mídia e analisadas na literatura acadêmica, o argumento central é que numa sociedade altamente hierarquizada como a brasileira, a vida adulta ganha uma dupla significação: quando a referência são os setores economicamente mais privilegiados o adulto indica um "consumidor que falhou", porque foi incapaz de adotar estilos de vida e formas de consumo para manter a juventude; quando a referência são os mais pobres, indica uma espécie de fantasia inatingível, porque os pobres são discriminados como indivíduos incapazes de alcançar um estágio da vida marcado pela maturidade, responsabilidade e compromisso.

**Palavras-chave:** ciclo da vida, curso da vida, consumo e estilos de vida, vida adulta.

“Only Barbalho cream/ Will turn entirely grey/ Your youthful hair/ Guaranteeing you respect/ With a wise and mature air/ In all important jobs!” With this advertisement, Nicolau Sevcenko (1998, p. 5) opens an article in which he highlights the huge demand for a precocious aging among Brazil’s youth at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Tonics to grow muscles and gain weight, dyes for thin beards and moustaches, thick-lensed spectacles and monocles and even a sinister ointment to turn teeth and nails yellow! And that is without including the enormous repertoire of resources used to manifest a venerable austerity: sideburns, grey hairs, dress-coats, top hats, canes, silver watches, cigars, cabochon rings, gaiters and insignias. A vast arsenal whose cumulative effect was designed to make the bearer appear as elderly as possible.

According to Sevcenko, in the society of arrivistes of the *belle époque*, public space was invaded by a legion of nouveau riche who, in their rush to replace the land-owning elites, disguised both the obscurity of their origin and the abruptness of their social rise. Simulating lineage, tradition and authority in the search for a distinguished air demanded the acquisition of packages of instant aging, which the market hurried to provide. The premature aging of the Brazilian population impressed travellers and historians who, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, contrasted the beauty and sensuality of girls in the slavery-based society with what Gilberto Freyre (1986:363) considered “the negligence of the body of the matrons over the age of eighteen.”

In her *Letters from Island of Teneriff, Brazil, The Cape of Good Hope and East Indies*, Mrs Kindersley, in 1777, remarked that the women of the elite in the Brazilian colony “look[ed] old very early in life,” and quickly lost the delicacy and charm that had characterized them.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs Graham, in her *Journal of a voyage to Brazil*, a voyage made between 1821 and 1823, is more vehement still, declaring the women of the elite in Bahia “almost indecently slovenly, after very early youth” (cf. Freyre, 1986, p. 364). Similarly, describing Rio de Janeiro in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, John Luccock states that the women of the elite

at eighteen they are already matrons, having attained complete maturity. After twenty a decline. They become fat and flabby, develop a double chin, turn pale, or else they dry and wither...they grow more ugly, with down on their faces and with the air of a man or of a virago<sup>2</sup>

Premature aging also affected the boys of the elite during the period, as Kidder & Fletcher show (1857, p. 176), describing the Brazilians of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century:

He is made a little old man before he is twelve years of age, - having his stiff black silk-hat, standing collar, and cane; and in the city he walks along as if everybody were looking at him, and as if he were encased in corsets. He does not run, or jump, or trundle hoop, or throw stones as boys in Europe and North America<sup>3</sup>.

The value attributed to youth as a stage of life marked by dynamism and creativity is much more recent, just as the construction of the youth as a symbol of rebelliousness and insurrection against hypocrisy can only be fully comprehended as a product of the post-war context.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Freyre 1986: 363.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Freyre 1986: 363.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Freyre 1986: 404.

Taking the stages in which life unfolds to be relational and performative, the central argument of this text is that we are now witnessing a double process that is reconfiguring the stages of aging and dissolving adult life as an experience of maturity, responsibility and commitment.

On one hand, youth is losing its connection to a specific age group and becoming a commodity, a value that must be achieved and maintained at any age by consuming the appropriate goods and services. On the other hand, old age is losing its connection to a specific age group and becoming a way of expressing a negligent attitude in relation to the body, a lack of motivation for life, a kind of self-inflicted disease, like the use of tobacco, alcoholic drinks and drugs, for example, is seen today.

The data on young segments of the population tends to expand the age range of this sector, which in Brazilian demographic surveys now includes people to the age of 24. Likewise the group encompassing the oldest sectors of the population is divided up into various other segments: middle-age, active retirement, the third age. Each of these stages has little relation with the representation of old age as a period of withdrawal and sobriety. On the contrary, they have been transfigured into the ideal time for personal satisfaction, the realization of dreams abandoned at earlier stages of life, the exploration of new forms of self-expression and new identities.

Themes such as the 'nesting syndrome,' used to describe adults who refuse to leave their parents' house, the 'kidults' or the 'adolescentization' of the more advanced stages of life, have served to indicate a new social configuration in which age differences and the very idea of life-cycles seem to be losing their meaning.

One of the essential features of the society of consumption is making the right to choose an obligation for everyone. Individuals who show themselves incapable of increasing their self-esteem and making life a gratifying experience are seen to be something like failed consumers who did not know how to adopt the right goods and services.

By exploring how changes in the life course are described, this article highlights the new types of social hierarchy generated and nurtured by the radicalization of the idea of the social construction of life-cycles, stimulating a particular type of consumerism.

### **Kidults, she-wolves and the third age**

Using the expression *kidults syndrome*, the English sociologist Frank Furedi (2004) discusses the growing infantilization of contemporary culture which has spread through the university, literature, TV, cinema and art across the world. The article begins with an account of the impact caused to him while walking around the campus of the University of Kent, in Canterbury, in the United Kingdom, when the author came across a group of young students absorbed in watching *Teletubbies* in a bar. How do we explain the interest of a group of youngsters between 18 and 21 in a TV program made for children still learning to walk? In fact it is not unusual for a proposal aimed at one age group to appeal to another, very different group. Activities programmed for people aged over 70, for example, frequently end up attracting women in their 50s.<sup>4</sup>

However Furedi (2004) presents a set of data that shows a surprising increase in the length of childhood, making 'Peterpandemonium' – a term coined by two American advertisers to describe people aged between

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<sup>4</sup> On programs for the third age, see Debert (1999).

20 and 30 who look for products that take them back to childhood, perceived as a more innocent and happier phase of life – big business across the planet. In 2002, the British market research group Mintel showed that 43% of young people from 20 to 24 listed cuddly toys as one of their favourite presents to give or receive on Valentine's Day. Playmate Toys now aims their publicity at adults after discovering that potential customers for their Simpsons figures include not just children but adults between 18 and 35.

Nostalgia for childhood is not just an Anglo-American phenomenon. Hello Kitty, a white kitten with a trademark flower or red ribbon, is tremendously popular among Japanese adults. Professionals and office workers take Hello Kitty stationery to work, chat to friends on Hello Kitty mobile phones and wear Snoopy ties.

Examples of the consumption of infant culture by an adult public can also be found in the media. The viewing figures for Cartoon Network among people aged between 18 and 34 are surprisingly large, while two of the biggest Hollywood successes in 2001 were *Shrek* and *Monsters, Inc.* The data presented by Furedi (2004) leads him to conclude that Peter Pan, the boy who did not want to grow up, would have little reason to flee home were he to live in contemporary London, New York or Tokyo.

The expressions 'boomerang generation,' 'parasite singles' or 'co-resident adults' highlight another aspect of the infantilization of adult life, namely the fact that an increasing number of men and women between 20 and 35 still live in the parental home or return there.<sup>5</sup>

The most common reason given for the interest in living in their parents' home is economic: the young adults lack the means to live alone or find it difficult to live a comfortable life. Furedi (2004) contests this idea, though, commenting on the relative wealth of single young people between 20 and 34. The recent boom in the sale of luxury products has been driven by conspicuous levels of consumption among parasite singles or boomerang kids, identified as consumers with a very high disposable income. In his words:

Economic insecurity may help explain why some grown-up children live at home, but it does little to illuminate the process as a whole. [...] Traditionally, young men and women left home not because life is likely to be cheaper, but because they were determined to strike out on their own. For many such people the relative discomfort of short-term poverty was a price worth paying in exchange for the promise of freedom offered by an independent lifestyle. [...] It is not so much economic exigency, but the difficulty that young adults have in conducting their relationships, that helps to explain why some of them are opting to live with mum and dad. (Furedi, 2004, p. 6-7).

The idea of adult life as an experience of maturity and independence also comes under fire when we turn our attention to older age groups. The expression 'adultescent' refers to a slightly older generation – people from 35 to 45 – who see themselves at the cutting-edge of youth culture. This erosion of the dividing line between age groups in the fashion world is the subject of an article by Álvaro Machado (1998), published in the

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<sup>5</sup> In the United Kingdom, the 2002 edition of Social Trends recorded that almost one third of men between 20 and 35 still lived with their parents, compared to just one in four in 1977-1978. The increasing number of adults who continue to live with their parents is part of an international phenomenon, as Furedi (2004) illustrates through examples of research undertaken in Japan, where 70% of the single women aged between 30 and 35 who are in work live with their parents, and in the USA, where the number of adult children residing with their parents has been rising since the 1970s, representing today around 18 million young people between 20 and 34 years, or around 38% of young single adults. On this return to the parents' home in Brazil, see Peixoto & Luz (2007).

'Caderno Mais!' supplement of the *Folha de S. Paulo* newspaper, declaring that adulthood is an increasingly frequent phenomenon in this area:

The product lines of stylists and clothes retailers are permeated by the dilemma that their clothing should have a young air, yet most of their consumers are found not among adolescents but adults. Tufi Duek, the owner of Forum and Triton, two of the most famous clothing brands for youths, was recently surprised by the results of a survey he had commissioned, which showed that half of Forum's customers were made up of "mature people looking to present themselves in a youthful way." "I was shocked by the share of the consumers aged over 30," says the stylist and entrepreneur. "[...] 42% of our male public and 40% of the female public were aged over 30, while also noting that 8% of the total preferred not to declare their age" [...]. Duek attributes this adult demand to the "nature of the Brazilian, who looks to cultivate the body and feeds beach culture."

The way in which a set of meanings associated with youth begins to be employed by older sectors is also evident in advertising and in soap operas.

Until the 1970s images of rebellion and the subversion of cultural patterns were strictly associated with young figures. Since the 1990s these images have also been associated with older people. One example is the advert for a microwave in which an old woman says she wants more free time for sex. In another advert, the family discovers grandmother in bed with an old man: she tells her startled children and grandchildren not to worry because they are planning on getting married.<sup>6</sup> The same imagery occurs in soap operas. Older or senior men and women not only serve as a prop for images of wealth and power, they are also depicted as people involved in amorous cases with younger individuals, eager to revolutionize sexual morality, denounce political corruption and adopt alternative lifestyles.

Young people, on the contrary, tend to be depicted as individuals still highly dependent on their parents' guidance or as premature adults striving to control their irresponsible parents and remind them that they need to grow up. The younger characters also tend to be shown as individuals willing to use any means to rise socially. The soap operas do not lack references to youth culture (for example, goths, punks, skinheads) or to gangs of youths involved in urban violence who terrorize their families and neighbours. But the tendency is for these characters to abandon these practices over the course of the story arc as they become involved in love affairs or discover their professional vocation.

The blurring of age boundaries intensifies in plots that centre on the conflicts involved when mother and daughter simultaneously share events such as dating, marriage and pregnancy.

If we move slightly further up the age ranges, we can see that the creation of the third age has also been accompanied by a growing interest in the imposition of adolescence on other moments of adult life.

As Laslett shows (1987), the invention of the third age reveals an unusual experience of aging, which cannot be understood simply as a reflection of the increased life expectancy in contemporary societies. According to Laslett, this invention requires the existence of a 'community of retirees' with enough influence in society and sufficient health, financial independence and other resources to achieve their expectations for this period as an ideal time for personal fulfilment and satisfaction.

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<sup>6</sup> On this theme, see Debert (2003).

Changes in employment structures led to an expansion in the waged middle classes and new expectations in terms of retirement, which – encompassing an increasingly younger contingent of the population– ceased to be a landmark in the transition to old age, a form of ensuring the subsistence of those who, because of their age, are no longer able to perform productive work.<sup>7</sup>

Lenoir (1979) shows that in France from the 1970s onwards a new pensions market was created, transforming pension funds into financially powerful agencies that, as some of the largest institutional investors, have the power to dictate the rules and rhythms of the financial markets.<sup>8</sup>

Competition between these financial groups leads them not only to guarantee a monthly income to pensioners, but also a series of other advantages and services, such as holidays, clubs and different kinds of accommodation. Employing professionals from different areas to research the living conditions and needs of older people, these institutions contributed actively in the invention of the third age and inspired the work with this category in other contexts, as in the Brazilian case.<sup>9</sup>

The growth of this market has been accompanied by the creation of a new language in opposition to traditional forms of treating old people and pensioners: the third age replaces old age; active retirement opposes retirement; old people's homes are now called residential centres, social workers are social animators, and social assistance acquires the name of gerontology. The signs of aging are inverted and gain new designations: 'new youth,' the 'leisure age.' Similarly there is an inversion in the signs of retirement, which ceases to be a moment of rest and refuge to become a period of activity and leisure. It is no longer just a question of solving the economic problems of the elderly, but also providing cultural and psychological care, enabling the social integration of a population taken to be marginalized. This is when we see the emergence of senior centres and universities for the third age as ways of creating more gratifying forms of sociability among the elderly.<sup>10</sup>

The new ways in which aging and old age are depicted and managed in contemporary Brazil are playing an active role in revising the stereotypes associated with aging. They offer a more positive image of aging, now conceived as a diversified experience in which physical diseases and mental decline, once considered normal during this stage of life, are redefined as general conditions that affect people at any time. The change in perceptions also allows new experiences of aging to be lived collectively. In these spaces the elderly can search for forms of self-expression and ways of exploring identities that were previously exclusive to young people.

These images that bombard the idea of adult life as a moment of maturity, independence, responsibility and commitment lead to a vision of the postmodern life course in which chronological age loses its relevance.

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<sup>7</sup> On retirement, see Debert & Simões (1994) and Simões (2000).

<sup>8</sup> On pension funds in Brazil, see Grün (2003). In Brazil, there are 250 pension funds with assets estimated at US\$ 18 billion and 2 million associates who, combined with their dependents, total 8 million. The Brazilian Private Pension Association estimates that this figure will reach 40 million by the end of the decade with the creation of another 750 foundations; in total there will be a thousand entities sponsored by around 8,100 companies (cf. *Folha de S. Paulo*, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Stucchi (1998), in her analysis of retirement preparation programs, shows how the pension funds of state companies in Brazil played an active role in promoting these new retirement patterns.

<sup>10</sup> On the Universities of the Third Age, see Guerreiro (1993), Lima (1999) and Cachioni (2003).

## **Postmodernity and life-cycles**

In examining the changes in the life course in contemporary western societies, Moody (1993) have concluded that the history of western civilization can be divided into three successive stages, in which the sensitivity invested in chronological age is radically distinct: premodernity, when chronological age is less relevant than family status in determining the degree of maturity and control of power resources; modernity, involving a chronologization of life; and postmodernity, which sets in motion a deconstruction of the life course in favour of a uni-age style.

In discussions of age during the premodern era, the main reference points are generally the works of Ariès (1991) and Elias (1990). In his study of childhood, Ariès (1991) shows how this category was constructed from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, increasing the distance between children and adults. In Medieval France children were not separated from the adult world. From the moment when their physical capacity permitted and at a relatively premature age, they participated fully in work and social life. The notion of childhood developed slowly across the centuries and this phase of life only gradually became treated in a specific form. Appropriate clothing and manners, games, and other activities began to distinguish the child from the adult. Specific institutions, like schools, were created to cater for children and prepare them for adult life.

Opposing the view that children in the past behaved like responsible adults, Elias (1990), in his work on the civilizing process, suggests that the behaviour of adults in the Middle Ages was much looser and much more spontaneous. The controls on emotions were less accentuated and, as with children, their expression did not entail any guilt or shame. For Elias, modernity increased the distance between adults and children, not only by considering childhood to be a phase of dependency, but also by constructing the adult as an independent, psychologically mature being, possessing the rights and obligations of citizenship.

Examining the historical transformations associated with modernization also means pointing out that one of the core dimensions of the process of individualization – and individualism as a value intrinsic to modernity – was the institutionalization of the life course. The ideas of equality and liberty became associated with clearly defined and separated life stages, whose boundaries were determined by chronological age. This is the sense in which Kohli & Meyer (1986) use the expression ‘chronologization of life’ to describe the transformations in the ways in which life is periodized, the transition time from one stage to another, the sensitivity invested in each of the stages, and indeed the life course as a social institution. This growing institutionalization encompassed practically all dimensions in the realm of the family and of the workplace, and is present in the organization of the productive system, in educational institutions, in the consumer market and in the public policies that increasingly focus on specific age groups.

In explaining the reasons that led to the chronologization of life, different weightings can be attributed to various dimensions. The standardization of childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age can be conceived as a response to economic changes, elicited above all by the transition from an economy based on the domestic unit to one based on the work market. Inversely, emphasis can be given to the modern State, which – by transforming questions relating to the private and family sphere into public order problems – became the primary institution responsible for guiding the life course, regulating all its stages from the moment of

birth to death, passing through the complex system of educational phases, joining the work market and retirement.<sup>11</sup>

However, the new age categories emerging today appear to point to a process of dechronologization, strongly suggesting that the idea of a strict sequence of age-defined roles fails to capture the reality of a society with today's level of technological development. This is the question that leads Held (1986) to propose that one of the striking features of the postmodern experience is the 'deinstitutionalization' or 'dechronologization' of life. His argument focuses on the changes taking place in production, in the family domain and in the makeup of household units.

In the area of production, the changes related to computerization, the speed at which new technologies are implemented and the rapid obsolescence of productive and administrative techniques means that the relation between age grades and career is obliterated, insofar as previously acquired knowledge frequently hinders openness and adaptation to innovations.

In the family domain, recent developments in the distribution of demographic events such as marriages, maternity, divorces and types of household unit indicate a society in which chronological age is becoming irrelevant: rather than transitions from one group to another, we find large variations in the ages at which people marry or have their first children and equally large variations in the age differences between parents and children. Family obligations tend to be disconnected from chronological age. The same generation, in kinship terms, presents an ever increasing variation in terms of chronological age (mothers for the first time at 16 and at 45), and successive generations, from the family point of view, belong to the same age group, such as mothers and grandmothers in the same age group.

An independent household unit can be established at any age without necessarily marking the start of a new family, meaning that people of very different chronological ages may have a similar residential experience.

Meyrowitz's account (1985) of the impact of electronic media on social behaviour points in the same direction. The author suggests that the media tends to integrate worlds that were previously isolated from each other, imposing new forms of behaviour that erase what was previously considered appropriate for a particular age group. Children gain access to what were once seen as solely the concern of adults, since the media dissolves the controls the latter had over the type of information desirable for younger ages. The information available, the themes with which people are concerned, their language, clothing and forms of leisure, have all tended to lose their specific age reference.

The modern life course is a reflection of Fordism, a logic anchored in the primacy of economic productivity and the subordination of the individual to the rationalizing requirements of the social order. Its corollary is the bureaucratization of life-cycles through the massification of public school and pensions. Three age groups were clearly demarcated: youth and school life; adulthood and work; old age and retirement. According to Moody (1993), erasure of the boundaries separating youth, adult life and old age and of the norms indicating the behaviour appropriate to these age groups reflects the emergence of a post-Fordist society, marked by an

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<sup>11</sup> Obviously when attempting to establish a connection between modernity and the chronologization of life, we need to take into account the variations in the stages and in the length into which each stage is periodized in different modern societies, as well as the type of chronological sequence that characterizes the experience of different social groups in the same society. Above all it is important to reflect on the specificity of women's life courses.



increase dominance of information technology, demassification of consumer markets, politics, the media and culture, and an increased fluidity and multiplicity of life-styles, as the outcome of an economy based more on consumption than productivity.

From this viewpoint, explaining the postmodern life course demands revising the way in which a universal fact is explained. The presence of age differences in all human societies was presumed to result from a need of social life, expressed in terms of the socialization process. Just as the various physical capacities required to perform particular activities are related to different stages of biological development, it was presumed that the diverse kinds of knowledge needed to fulfil social roles were acquired and accumulated over time, implying an age progression.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the contemporary experience makes it necessary to revise the conceptions of a developmental psychology in which the life course is periodized like a unilinear evolutive sequence with each stage, despite the social and cultural particularities, assuming a universal character.

Certainly a set of examples could be employed to relativize the radicality of these transformations. Age groups are still a fundamental dimension in social organization: the incorporation of changes is very unlikely to occur without a new chronologization of life; it would be an exaggeration to presume that age has ceased to be a fundamental element in defining a person's status. However this flexibilization in the parameters of what were previously taken to be the kinds of behaviour appropriate to each age group, along with their rights and obligations, is accompanied by the transformation of each age created category into a symbolic tie connecting political actors and consumer markets. Pensioners are political headlines in all the newspapers because, despite the differences in pension levels, the overall feeling is that this is a specific issue which the State cannot ignore. Youths, children, adults and the elderly are key categories in producing clothing for the fashion industry, in creating specific areas of professional knowledge and practices, and in defining forms of leisure. The child statute is another topic under discussion. While some insist that children should be given the same rights as adults, others emphasize equally strongly their state of dependency. Likewise those arguing that old age is a new youth, a productive stage of life, always reiterate the right to a pension, beginning at a set chronological age.

The supposed irrationality of reason, the critique of universalist assumptions and the value attributed to pluralism and local knowledge, all central elements of postmodernity, undoubtedly help explain the collapse in the authority of adults, but ages are powerful and efficient mechanisms in the creation of consumer markets, in the definition of rights and obligations, and in the constitution of political actors, especially since they are independent and neutral in relation to stages of physical and mental maturity. An examination of chronological ages involves recognizing that they are still a fundamental element in the modern State's task – so well described by Michel Foucault – of regulating the social body with the production of categories that classify and hierarchize populations.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> On this topic, see Eisenstadt (1976) as well as Debert (1999) for a discussion of how Meyer Fortes established differences between chronological age, generational age and levels of maturity.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed analysis of the importance of Foucault's notion of biopower for the study of the life course, groups and age categories, see Debert (1999).

## Failed consumers and adult life

The attempt to comprehend the meaning of adult life in contemporary societies has occupied an ever larger space in the print media and on radio and television programs interested in highlighting new patterns of behaviour. However, it is still a little-explored subject in terms of academic research. Most of this production is focused on themes relating to young people and children and, more recently, to old age and the third age,<sup>14</sup> but we know little about the sector that has yet to retire and has children considered adults.

In the introduction to her book *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*, Gail Sheehy (1976) playfully makes the following remarks before exploring the various phases involved in the most advanced stages of life:

Studies of child development have plotted every nuance of growth and given us comforting labels such as the Terrible Twos and the Noisy Nines. Adolescence has been so carefully deciphered, most of the fun of being impossible has been taken out of it. But after meticulously documenting our periods of personality development up to the age of 18 or 20—nothing. Beyond the age of 21, apart from medical people who are interested only in our gradual physical decay, we are left to fend for ourselves on the way downstream to senescence, at which point we are *picked up again by gerontologists*. (Sheehy, 1976, p. 10, author's italics).

This book, like self-help manuals,<sup>15</sup> aims to demystify the jargon used by experts and “make a lively and healing art of self-examination available to people who [...] were finding themselves caught in the snarls of growing up adult but, having no guide, were holding themselves or their partners to blame” (Sheehy, 1976, p. 15).

In her book, adult life is divided into four successive periods: the 20s and “the painful destruction of roots”; the 30s, “Catch-30”; the 40s, “rooting and extending”; and the 50s and “the fatal decade.”<sup>16</sup> Based on 115 interviews with middle class Americans, the author describes the problems specific to each of these stages and innovative forms of solving them. Published in the United States in 1976 after three years of research, the book became a best-seller, paving the way for an increasing number of publications concerned with providing the wider public with a more nuanced view of adult life as a whole or of one of its stages with its problems and solutions.

In these publications, the horizon of the adult being is no longer conceived to involve a journey downstream towards senescence. The ‘fatal decade’ can be a period of ‘renewal or resignation,’ a period “of both danger and opportunity” because “[a]ll of us have the chance to rework the narrow identity by which we defined ourselves in the first half of life. [...] But by disassembling ourselves, we can glimpse the light and gather our parts into a renewal.” (Sheehy, 1976, p. 30).

The expression ‘age of the she-wolf’ – which Regina Lemos (1995) made famous in Brazil in her description of the 40-year old woman – leaves no doubts that this can be the best half of a woman’s life. Including the

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<sup>14</sup> On the third age, see the set of authors from the collection edited by Barros (1998) and the high number of gerontology magazines.

<sup>15</sup> On self-help manuals and middle age, see Castro (2009).

<sup>16</sup> In 1995 the author published a new book, *New Passages*, in which the number of passages increases and extra attention is paid to the retirement phase.

accounts of 96 women, Lemos presents this age as an ideal moment for the discovery of new potentialities, engaging in seduction, embarking on motherhood or a professional career, the inauguration of new projects and the fulfilment of others that had been adjourned.

As Anthony Giddens shows (1992a), the idea of life-cycle loses its meaning under modernity since the connections between personal life and continuity between generations are broken. In premodern societies, tradition and continuity were closely linked to the generations. The life-cycle had a strong connotation of renewal, since each generation rediscovered and relived ways of life of preceding generations. In modern contexts, the concept of generation only makes sense in opposition to standardized time. The practices of a generation are only repeated if they have been reflexively justified. The life course is transformed into a space of open experiences rather than ritualized passages from one stage to the next. Each phase of transition tends to be interpreted by the individual as an identity crisis, and the life course is constructed in terms of the anticipated need to confront and solve these phases of crisis.<sup>17</sup>

This adolescentization of the adult life course emerges in a context shaped by the ‘reflexive project of the self,’ which, according to Giddens (1992b), does not represent a closure to the world, as presumed by the idea of a narcissistic culture. On the contrary, the changes he identifies clear the way for more gratifying experiences, more satisfying and equal relationships with others, in harmony with a democratic society. From this point of view, an exploration of the adolescentization of life stages involves exalting the pleasurable side of the contemporary experience of encouraging diversity.

Authors like Jean-Pierre Boutinet (1995) in *L'adulte en question(s) face aux défis d'une culture postindustrielle*, by contrast, provide a far more sombre analysis of contemporary adult life. The idea of autonomy characterizing this stage is replaced by the situation of vulnerability and dependency involved in professional training, which must now be continued without interruption, combined with job losses and the personal crises involved in an endless series of ever-present choices. According to Boutinet, the world is seeing a precocious liberation of individuals from childhood and adolescence (with the reduction in the age of majority, for example) and yet, at the same time, an infantilization of adult life. The adult is threatened by a double vulnerability: on one hand, an interminable youth, on the other, a precocious retirement. Consequently, the “active adult is more and more an ideal and less and less a reality” (Boutinet, 1995, p. 90). As far as ideological and religious spheres, family or profession no longer comprise poles of identification, the author concludes, disillusionment can assume a variety of forms ranging from indifference to the famous burn out, the exhaustion of the professional worker in a frenetic activism.

For Mike Featherstone (1994), the ‘aestheticization of life’ intrinsic to postmodern culture has a precise generational stamp: the 45 generation, the baby boomers, at the moment when they entered middle age. The view of declining public life and the tyranny of intimacy that produces a culture dominated by narcissism – as Christopher Lasch (1991) and Richard Sennett (1988) argue – or indeed its contrary, the view of high modernity as a period involving a reflexive project of the self in harmony with a more democratic society – as Anthony Giddens suggests (1992a) – are for Featherstone views typical of the baby boomers, who have

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the concept of generations and its implications for public policies, see Biggs (2007). On the relation between generation and collective subjectivities, see Domingues (2002).

actively recreated values and styles in all the life stages through which they have passed and who are now not only engaged in redefining more advanced stages of life, but also, as part of this task, occupy key positions in the production, divulgation and consumption of goods identified with postmodernity. The characteristic mark of these goods – which leads authors like Giddens to emphasize their libertarian nature, in tune with a fairer society – is the promise that it is possible to escape every kind of determinism and, therefore, every kind of constraint and stereotype, norm and behavioural pattern based on age.

Exploring these questions invites more detailed studies on different generational cohorts. However it would be illusory to think that these changes are accompanied by a more tolerant attitude in relation to different ages. The striking characteristic of this process is the value attributed to youth, which is associated with values and life-styles rather than a specific age group per se. The promise of eternal youth is a fundamental mechanism in the constitution of consumer markets.

The life course as a social and cultural construction cannot be understood as something that human beings can do and redo, a process that places no limits on creativity and to which any meaning can be given.

We need to examine with more attention the limits that our society places on our capacity to inscribe culture in nature. Rejuvenescence is a consumer market in which aging tends to be seen as a result of personal negligence, a lack of involvement in motivating activities, the adoption of inadequate patterns of consumption and lifestyles. The constant offer of opportunities to renew the body, identities and self-images conceals the problems endemic to the aging process. The inevitable decline of the body, the ungovernable body unable to respond to the individual's wishes, is perceived rather as the outcome of transgressions and hence undeserving of pity.

Undoubtedly our range of choices is expanded when identities imply biographical decisions and when the body can be increasingly manipulated to produce the desired appearance.

It must be recognized, though, that while individual responsibility for choice is distributed equally, the means to act in accordance with this responsibility are not. Freedom of choice, as Bauman (1998) astutely shows, is gradated, and combining freedom of action with the fundamental inequality of social conditions – imposing the obligation of freedom without the resources that allow a truly free choice – can often be a recipe for a life without dignity, filled with humiliation and self-depreciation.

As we have seen, Brazilian history was marked by the premature maturing of its population and the value given to “a wise and mature air,” as the advertising for Barbalho cream promised. However, we are seeing a dissolution of adulthood, which acquires distinct meanings in a highly hierarchized society like Brazil's. Either the problem relates to consumers unable to adopt lifestyles to ensure eternal youth, or it is something idealized exclusively by the poor. An idealization that is lamented as unrealizable, given that pregnancy among their teenage girls and the involvement of their boys in urban violence serve as a social explanation for the much desired and unattainable fantasy of a stage of life among the poorest characterized by maturity, responsibility and commitment.

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