

Part I

Basic Concepts

Introduction

Ageing is high on the political agenda in many countries and international organisations, which is not surprising considering that to some authors it ‘may be the most far-reaching process defining the economic, fiscal, and social changes societies are likely to experience over the next 40 years’ (Bogetic et al. 2015, p. 4). The United Nations (UN) spearheaded ageing policy development with the first World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna, Austria, in 1982 (United Nations 1982). In 1991, the UN General Assembly adopted the ‘United Nations Principles for Older Persons’, (United Nations 1991) and in 2002, a second World Assembly was held in Madrid (United Nations 2002). The principles were couched in a positive tone, appreciating the contribution that older people make to their societies.

Despite laudable initiatives such as these, population ageing has a bad press: a study of articles on *The Economist* published between January 1997 and April 2008 found that 168 out of 262 articles portrayed population ageing as a burden (Martin et al. 2009). Among many non-academic economic commentators, it seems to be causing or going to cause all sorts of problems: population ageing is a ‘crisis’ (Bank 1994), a ticking economic ‘time bomb’ (Venneberg and Eversole 2010), an ‘agequake’ (Wallace 2001), a ‘silver tsunami’ (Fox 2001), a ‘demographic winter’ (Geinoz et al. 1989; Dumont 2008), a ‘shift’ with seismic consequences (Little and Triest 2001), or the ‘gray dawn’ (Peterson 1999) that will bring forth the ‘coming generational storm’ (Kotlikoff and Burns 2005)—what Domingo termed a ‘demodystopia’, that is, a dystopia ‘brought about by demographic change or that make population matters a

salient concern, (Domingo 2008, p. 725). According to Katz, this ‘alarmist demography’ is a consequence of the power/knowledge¹ dominant relations in Western society (Katz 1992). Some academic economists also see population ageing as a source of negative effects on the economy—for example, on the financial markets, there is an ‘assets meltdown’ hypothesis (Mankiw and Weil 1989; Poterba 2001)—see Chap. 9 in Volume III. US economist Paul Samuelson, in the first edition of his well-known introductory textbook, asserted: ‘The first lesson in economics is: things are often not what they seem’ (Samuelson 1948, p. 8). We will see along this book whether or not the situation is as apocalyptic as it seems.

In part, this negative slant is a consequence of purposeful spin, that is, of ‘telling a media story which frames events, character and conduct in a way that creates a particular mood and may lead to desired political outcomes’ (Burns et al. 2016, p. 4). Whether this reflects a wider ‘neoliberal governance’ (De Angelis 2003; Kunow 2014) agenda as Davidson (2016) affirms or can be characterised as part of the ‘politics of fiscal squeeze’ (Hood et al. 2014) is not discussed in this book. Setting aside ideological or any ill-based reasons, this alarmist discourse to some extent also reflects an ambiguity that permeates most policy approaches to economics and population ageing: on the one hand, increasing longevity is a success story that is to be celebrated; on the other, it would be putting an almost insurmountable pressure on the public purse and denting resources that could be used elsewhere. This tension—‘a tad schizophrenic’, to borrow from McDaniel (2009, p. 686D)—is felt in report after report, policy document after policy document. Interestingly, the French historian Georges Minois mentions that a similar ambiguity is found throughout the whole of history concerning public attitudes to individual ageing: trying to prolong one’s days but complaining about or fearing the ‘evils’ of old age at the same time (Minois 1989).

Minois’s finding is not unexpected because, as much as population ageing, individual ageing is also considered a foe: humankind has been waging a war since at least the Sumer civilisation (as recorded, for example, in the Edwin Smith Papyrus dating from ca. 1500 BC) to prevent, postpone, or reverse individual ageing or to achieve the related goal of prolonging life.²

A Note on Terminology

How people refer to other people is, of course, very important. Pejorative or demeaning expressions reflect obvious intentions. However, even apparently neutral or formal words may contain negative connotations. In gerontology, this

(continued)

has been studied in relation with ageism. I have been involved in a research project on financial resources among people aged 50–64, which the research team referred to as *tomorrow's pensioners*, until the results from the qualitative component of the study concluded that the participants vehemently opposed to being addressed as *tomorrow's pensioners*. As a result, we changed the way we referred to this age group.

Mindful of the nuances in the English language,³ in this textbook, I am going to use the expressions 'older people' and 'older adults', which have been found neutral, eschewing other terminologies such as 'seniors/senior citizens', 'the aged', 'the ageing', or 'the elderly' (except in literal quotations). This is in line with recommendations by the *United Nations's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights* (1995), the *Thesaurus of Aging Terminology* (Rimkus et al. 2005), and the style guide produced jointly by the *International Longevity Center USA* and *Aging Services of California*, 2009.⁴

Languages, including denotations and connotations, change over time—'elderly' was acceptable in the 1980s—see, for example, Nuessel (1982). If this book sees any future editions, the chosen form of address may very well vary.

Notes

1. In Foucault's sense. See Foucault (1980, 1977).
2. For a comprehensive history of ideas about the prolongation of life until 1800, see Gruman (2003). Overall (2003) presents a philosophical analysis and Gullette (1997) gives the viewpoint of cultural studies. Nowadays, anti-ageing is big industry, valued at US\$122.3 billion in 2013 and expected to grow to US\$191.7 billion by 2019 (Transparency Market Research 2014).
3. Similar differences can be found in languages as different from each other as Spanish (Agulló and Silveria 2004), German (Kramer and Wissenschaften 2006), or Japanese (Backhouse 2008—see http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2008/09/02/language/so-is-it-respect-for-the-aged-the-elderly-or-the-seniors/U94sM_lkS7w).
4. See also Palmore (2000) and Avers (2011).

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