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The third age in Poland. Pleasure and a new form of sociality

Streszczenie

Trzeci wiek to pole kulturowe, na które składają się praktyki kultury czasu wolnego emerytów. Wykształcił się w krajach zachodnich w latach 80. XX wieku. Celem artykułu jest analiza trzeciego wieku w Polsce: jakimi drogami zjawisko upowszechnia się w Polsce; z jakimi praktykami współwystępuje; w jakim stopniu stanowi powielenie wzorca zachodniego, a na ile ma odrębną specyfikę? Badano praktyki życia codziennego w późnej dorosłości w pięciu miejscowościach oraz dyskurs na temat starości w dwu sezonach popularnego polskiego serialu. Wśród badanych emerytów dominują praktyki użyteczności i unikania bezczynności charakterystyczne dla starości “przy rodzinie” bądź osamotnienie wynikające z izolacji od więzi rodzinnej. Trzeci wiek upowszechnia się w ramach oferty aktywizacyjnej pierwszego i trzeciego sektora. Do podjęcia praktyk trzeciego wieku motywuje osoby starsze ucieczka przed samotnością. Wewnętrzny mechanizm, będący motorem tych praktyk jest taki sam jak na Zachodzie, jest nim poszukiwanie przyjemności. Wzorców zachowań dostarczają media. Wykształca się nowoczesny hedonizm polegający na poszukiwaniu przyjemności w każdym doświadczeniu, charakterystyczny dla zachodnich społeczeństw konsumpcyjnych. Słabo rozwinięty jest aspekt konsumpcji czasu wolnego za pomocą usług rynkowych ze względu na mniejszą zamożność polskich emerytów.

Słowa kluczowe:

starość, późna dorosłość, trzeci wiek, czas wolny, konsumpcja, nowoczesny hedonizm

Abstract

The third age is a cultural field realised through pensioners' leisure practices. It emerged in Western countries in the 1980s. This article is concerned with the third age in Poland and enquires into how the third age is spreading in Poland, what practices it is accompanied by, and to what extent it copies the Western pattern or how specific it is to Poland. The article analyses daily practices of later life in five locations and the discourse on old age in a popular Polish TV series. The pensioners in question are either engaged in practices of usefulness and avoidance of idleness characteristic of older people living with their family, or experience loneliness resulting from weaker family bonds. The third age is becoming more widespread due to activity opportunities provided by the public and non-profit sectors. Older people take up third age practices to escape loneliness. Pleasure-seeking, the internal mechanism propelling third age practices, is the same as in the West. What is emerging is a modern hedonism, encouraged by the media, consisting of seeking pleasure in every experience characteristic of Western consumer societies. Consumption of market leisure services is less developed in the Polish third age due to the lesser affluence of Polish pensioners.

Key words:

old age, later life, third age, leisure, consumption, modern hedonism

A new model of later life, the so-called third age, emerged in the US and Western Europe in the 1980s. Due to the longer life span after retirement, physically and mentally able pensioners felt the need to maintain productivity and lead meaningful lives. Peter Laslett (1989) proposed that the third age which follows the first age (childhood and youth) and the second age (adulthood) should be differentiated from the fourth – old age. The third age would be the crown of life, a period of self-fulfilment and social activism, free from the obligations of the second age, secure thanks to pensions.

These postulates of new citizenship have not been fulfilled. The third age in the lives of American and European pensioners tends to be centred on enjoying leisure time rather than social activism. Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs (2005) use Pierre Bourdieu's theory in defining it as a cultural field consisting of leisure practices, i.e. seeking pleasure in consuming market services. The third age emerged and became popular among the baby boomer generation, which had relatively high pensions and a better education than previous generations. During their youth the cultural revolution of the 1960s took place, as a result of which the well-being and pleasure of an individual became socially respected values.

The authors believe that with the popularisation of the practices and values of the Western world, the range of the third age as a cultural field has expanded. One could even say that the third age has a global range at present. However, as argued by anthropologists, local cultures usually subject Western values and practices to modifications, adapting them to the way of life known to them. This process is called glocalisation. This article is devoted to the development of the third age in Poland as an example of glocalisation. Poland is an interesting case as it highly values a tradition of living with the family in old age. My research questions are as follows: how, if at all, is the cultural field of the third age spreading in Poland? To what extent does it copy the Western pattern or how specific it is to Poland and with what practices does it coexist? Gilleard and Higgs differentiate discourse and practices constituting the cultural field of the third age. I have analysed the practices of old people in five locations and the discourse about old age in a popular TV series watched by pensioners.

1. Old age and the third age: later life in modernity

Old age started being considered a separate phase of life at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Hareven 1982). The fall in mortality resulted in increased social visibility of older people and the emergence of gerontological literature. It is then that old age began to be associated with weakness, dependence and illness – connotations still valid today. When only a few made it to old age, they were the strongest individuals in their communities (survival of the fittest). When reaching old age became more common thanks to the improvement of life conditions and the progress of medicine, people

who reached old age were weaker and more dependent. In industrial societies, older workers found it difficult to stay on the job market. In order to secure their needs, universal retirement was postulated. Its establishment in Western Europe at the beginning of the 20th century confirmed the existence of a social category of old people, namely pensioners.

Tamara Hareven argues that the institution of a pension has loosened instrumental relations in the family, i.e. relations based on work carried out jointly by family members. Throughout the 20th century, intergenerational exchange relationships gradually dwindled. At the same time a segregation of age groups in society occurred. These factors have caused old people to become isolated in Western societies.

In the 1970s, UK magazines for pensioners started promoting modern appearance and an extended leisure lifestyle (Featherstone and Hepworth 1993). In the 1980s, a change in the practices of pensioners appeared – the third age was born (Gilleard and Higgs 2005). The first reason for this was increased affluence among pensioners. Until the 1970s, UK pensioners were homogenous in their poverty. The 1980s saw the retirement of people who kept their savings in occupational and personal pension funds. Pensioners became a more affluent and financially diverse category. Another reason for the birth of the third age was a loosening of the family and neighbourly bonds associated with geographical and social mobility, the presence of household appliances and the popularisation of mass media. The third reason lies in the change of habitus – the new generation of pensioners consisted of baby boomers who rebelled against the status quo in their youth. They contributed such new values to social life as youth, beauty, pleasure, authenticity, partnership and novelty. It was the developing market which was the motor of the cultural revolution happening in the baby boomers' youth. Western societies added the new category of young people to consumers and created new habits of frequenting the cinema and cafés, purchasing gadgets associated with pop culture icons, and participating in sport, tourism and anti-ageing practices. Having retired, this generation continued the practices carried out throughout earlier life, and so the third age emerged. The basic social role of a pensioner became that of a consumer.

2. Later family life in Poland

At the beginning of the 20th century on Polish lands the dominant family model was multigenerational, characterised by the cohabitation of three generations in one household: old parents and son with wife and children. The family was a production unit; the division of labour determined by sex, age and the position within the family (Szynkiewicz 1976). In these harsh conditions, participation in consumption depended on work carried out. The habit of work was instilled from early childhood. Old people did menial jobs and were responsible for childcare. Usefulness and idleness avoidance

were the primary principles of their existence (Lehr 2007). Inactivity was associated with impending death.

The national pension scheme was introduced in Poland in 1933. The pensions, which were low, did not extend to farmers until 1977, so instrumental relations in families continued to thrive. At the end of the 1960s, 67 percent of old people were living with their children. In the countryside, they formed permanent institutions in the form of multigenerational families; in the cities a more common option was temporary cohabitation resulting from the need to take care of elders or help working children. In the People's Republic of Poland old age without family was characterised by loneliness and poverty due to low pensions. At the end of the 1960s this situation concerned about 20 percent of old people (Piotrowski 1973).

After the political transformation, pensioners were no longer poor compared to the rest of the society due to their stable monthly income. The level of consumption among pensioners rose (Szatur-Jaworska et al. 2006). 44 percent of them provided financial support to their children. Cohabitation with children became less common, with 41 percent cohabiting in 1999. The percentage of pensioners living alone was on the rise (Czekanowski 2002).

3. The method

In order to find out about the practices of pensioners living in various locations and regions, I have analysed the results of two qualitative studies. One is an instance of ethnographic fieldwork on everyday life carried out in Warsaw between 2005 and 2007, centred on seven women and four men selected on a contrastive basis so that they represented a variety of approaches to old age (Zalewska 2009). The other is research carried out by employees of the Institute of Public Affairs on the support available for seniors in local communities, as conducted by Mariola Raław in four rural and municipal localities in the Podlaskie and Kujawsko-Pomorskie regions in 2010. I have analysed 16 interviews with men and women in earlier and later old age; four from each locality (Raław 2011).

In order to capture the change in the discourse on later life I have analysed seasons one and eleven (2000/01 and 2010/11) of the TV series *M jak miłość* (*L for Love*), broadcast on Polish public TV since 2000. This is the most popular TV series among Polish pensioners, which makes it an example of discourse directed at elderly people. It tells the story of a family and the intimate relationships of its members, with an elderly couple being at the head of the family (Zalewska 2013).

4. Third age in Poland. Leisure and pleasure

Instrumental relations occurred in the families of some of the interlocutors. Almost all the remaining interlocutors would be keen on living close to their families if

given a choice. This did not necessarily mean cohabiting, but rather everyday contact and cooperation. Mr and Mrs Kowalski¹, who were visited by their daughters once a month, complained about the infrequency of visits and lack of help with household chores (woman 75+, man 75+, Warsaw). A retired teacher told me about the routine of life with her husband, wishing that their children and grandchildren could live nearby, as that would change things (woman 75+, town in Podlasie). Longing, emptiness and loneliness appear when instrumental family relationships no longer function, but elders would still like to live according to the old model (Zalewska 2010). Isolation from the family bond appears.

A sense of longing was encouraged by the discourse accessible to pensioners. The model of the multigenerational family was promoted in *L for love*, where older protagonists lived with their son, his wife and children on a farm in the countryside. A change occurred in the course of the eleventh season (episode 764). As a result of the son's infidelity, his wife moved out to Warsaw with their children. Older characters were very worried about this situation until the female character Barbara stated that the world does not end with children – they brought them up as best they could, but now it was time for them to live their own lives. She invited her husband to a picnic by the river. This is the series' third age manifesto. The picnic did not happen in the end, as the elderly couple were prevented from leaving the house by their children's arriving unexpectedly with problems. It should be noted, however, that the third age comes in as a substitute, filling the void left by the family concerned with their own matters. A similar situation concerns another character from season eleven – Renia. This woman aged 50+ was complaining that her children were not visiting or calling (episode 763). A friend advised that this was normal and that she should get on with her own life. Renia followed the friend's advice, entered an intimate relationship, and moved in with her partner.

As far as the interlocutors were concerned, the motivation to enter third age came from their children leaving the family home, or from weakened contact with them. Due to a difficult financial situation and loneliness, Agnieszka visited the Day Care Centre in Warsaw daily. The centre provided free meals, excursions and the opportunity to spend time with other senior citizens. Her elder son died and she visited the younger one, who was mentally disabled and in care, every week. Her life was in the day care centre – it was there that she felt liked and respected and became part of the governing committee. Her female friends admired her feminine style and sought advice on various matters. She also had a “boyfriend” there. The centre used young people's slang and time was spent gossiping, dancing, enjoying excursions and engaging in social activities. Those frequenting the centre watched various TV series, e.g. the American *The Bold and*

¹ When referring to interlocutors participating in ethnographic fieldwork I use changed names or surnames to emphasise the closeness connected with participant observation. When referring to the interlocutors featured in the research carried out by the Institute of Public Affairs I quote their sex, age and location, according to the standards used in such studies.

the Beautiful and it seems that they modelled their social relationships on that of the TV protagonists. What mattered was attractive appearance, popularity and intimate satisfaction. The dimension of pleasure derived from participating in leisure culture is present in the practices of the Polish third age. However, the dimension of satisfying consumer aspirations through market goods and services is reduced – Agnieszka bought cheap clothes at the local market place and the excursions for senior citizens were subsidised.

It is difficult to estimate the extent of participation in leisure culture. In the studied localities in the Podlaskie and Kujawsko-Pomorskie provinces, the majority of older people stayed at home, performing practices of usefulness and idleness avoidance or longing for it, experiencing emptiness and watching TV. The norm existing in the rural community stated that an elderly woman should mind the house. The restricted opportunity for activities in the studied localities also constituted a limitation (Raław 2011). Leisure culture practices were observed in public and non-profit organisations acting for the benefit of old people, such as senior clubs, vocal clubs, third age universities and parish community activities. Such practices were also present in social events for senior citizens, excursions and pilgrimages organised by local authorities, social welfare centres and the church. Apart from that they took the form of informal coffee and cake meetings and nameday parties. Senior citizens who lived alone and whose time was not excessively occupied by family and local community affairs filled their lives with leisure practices to a large extent.

5. A new form of sociality?

It is the sense of commitment inscribed in the bond between the individual and the community (Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk, 2004) that makes one participate in the practices of usefulness and idleness avoidance. A different mechanism must be responsible for engaging in leisure practices, as it is not motivated by the common good of a group, nor is there a duty to participate. One could think that through leisure practices elderly people are subject to socialisation in a new type of sociality characteristic of consumer societies.

The emergence of a new type of sociality may be interpreted by referring to Colin Campbell's concept of modern hedonism (1987). This type of hedonism evolved within the bourgeoisie of Western Europe as part of the leisure and consumer revolutions of the 18th century, which accompanied the industrial revolution. The revolutions were spurred by the popularisation of leisure culture and availability of increasingly mass produced goods. Modern hedonism followed from the condemnation by ascetic protestant morality of traditional pleasures understood as separate events bringing the sensual gratification keenly pursued by the aristocracy. The modern bourgeoisie developed an ability to find pleasure in every experience. They acquired the ability to substitute

an illusion for the actual stimulus and to create pleasurable environments in their own minds. Modern hedonism laid the foundations for the experience of consumer desire, i.e. seeking gratification in acquiring and consuming everyday life objects. Modern hedonism extended onto further layers of Western societies in the 20th century in the time of mass consumption. The explosion of consumerism, which affected the generation of baby boomers in the period of their youth, can be understood as the development of modern hedonism on a mass scale.

6. Conclusion

Old and new practices coexist among Polish pensioners. The most dominant are practices of usefulness and idleness avoidance or loneliness as a result of isolation from the family bond. The third age is starting to become more popular in Poland thanks to a modest range of activities available to seniors as part of the public and non-profit sectors. In this sense it is different from the third age in the West, which is mainly realised as part of the commercial sector. Polish pensioners do not tend to fulfil their needs on the free market, due to their lesser affluence. The internal mechanism which is the motor of these practices is the same both in Poland and in the West – it is the pursuit of pleasure, which points to globalisation rather than glocalisation.

If modern hedonism is responsible for the dimension of pleasure in the practices of the third age, this would mean that consumption and the free market play a greater role as factors of later life changes than previously assumed. Tamara Hareven believed the state to be the main factor of later life changes, whereas Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs believed it to be consumption and its changes in the second half of the 20th century. Modern hedonism came into being earlier, and after World War II, when Western European countries reached a level of mass consumption, it became a mass experience. The Polish example shows that for modern hedonism to emerge, consumer aspirations alone are sufficient – fulfilment is not essential. The models of behaviour are disseminated by the media. The development of the third age in Poland is most likely part of a wider phenomenon of social change, in which older mechanisms of sociality are replaced with new ones, characteristic of Western consumer societies.

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