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CRISIS PHENOMENA CAUSED BY OLD AGE AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL POLICY

In the following, we shall bring up arguments in support of the views formulated below, which are the three basic questions of the present paper.

- A well functioning social policy, a most perfect and far-going care, and the best organised health provision can still be no more, than a superficial treatment of modern society's old-age problem, since the worst dilemma of the old remains: that highly valuable gift, a nearly doubled span of life, is gradually losing its value for great masses. Prolonged life does not automatically entail, that those additional years are made meaningful in social practice, full of functional activities, and assuring for the old a position in society that can guarantee self-respect and dignity.

- Those who face the problem of the aged and intend to do something about it, are first of all looking for the best forms of care and provision. This is a vital problem, since we are already late in providing for the necessities of life or even for the security of existence. It must be remembered, however, that even with the best functioning social policy, a change can be only a correction. The veritable problem is presented by delayed /in some respect:

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lacking/ social adaptation to the demographic and social explosion. Our main criticism of the correction programmes of social policy is not, that they exist, but rather, that they are exclusive in their existence. Much less is heard about the deeperlying trouble, which is the inability of society to adapt itself.

- Without adaptation, i.e. without finding the new forms of social coexistence, the two main problems of the situation of the aged: dependance and segregation, cannot be settled.

In this paper we shall discuss the social conditions and pull-backs of this adaptation, relying first of all on the Hungarian experience.

From losing one's place in society to becoming a burden
- the way of the old

Ageing, i.e. old age as a mass social phenomenon and a tense social problem is an achievement of modern civilisation: the tensions are the negative returns of this achievement. It has been the endeavour of centuries to widen the boundaries of human life, and success came in the last few decades as a great achievement of this century's civilisation. The progress and transformation of medical science, the extension of health care to everyone, the

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elimination of epidemics of high death tolls and, perhaps in the first place, the fast improvement of the material conditions of life /of an earlier inconceivable rate/ brought with them a demographic restructuring nearly every ten years. Meanwhile, changes have taken place in the forms of coexistence between generations, regulated, sanctioned and practised with more or less permanence through long historical periods, clearly determined by economic conditions, traditional usage and community behaviour. The change has been radical. To give an idea of it, a few figures will be sufficient: in the last forty years, life expectancy in Hungary has grown by a third. In 1941 10 per cent of the population was old, today nearly 20 per cent, and by the turn of the millennium every fourth person will be aged. ~~When~~ The generations born in the second half of this century may expect their life to be almost the double of that of their parents - even more so of their grandparents - born in the first half of the century. This is a revolutionary change, bringing crisis into the life of the individual, as well as of the society. ^{- as all the other civilised countries -} Hungary was unprepared for such a one-sided "demographic explosion", economically, as well as in its institutional system, and this complex dilemma is not, and cannot be, assimilated as yet, either by the individual, or by the society. The aged, just as their

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environment, struggle in the meshes of conceptions and preconceptions, of useless or only half-usable and unformulated values and attitudes. Obviously, the time that has passed has not been long enough to develop new traditions and rules of coexistence, sometimes not even for solving the most burning questions.

The anxiety concomitant with the unsettled problems and the resulting bad conscience leads to a double-faced attitude: on the one hand, an almost hostile panic because of the burden the "aged unprovided for" lay on society, siphoning off energy and money from elsewhere, on the other hand, sentimental reproaches awakening conscience drive a rational social worry towards the spheres of privacy.

Following a total renewal of the social insurance system after the war, the paying of pensions was charged on the central state budget. Thus amid the economic difficulties of our days, and with a scarce budget, it is really a source of tension that the number of pensioners is today the fivefold of the 1960 number, and that the expenditures on pensions have grown to nineteenfold in 25 years. From this fact derives the slogan that "non-working" pensioners have to be "kept" by the active population. Meanwhile, with budget pension expenses increasing, the pensioners' living standards have considerably

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^{in the last 10-15 years}
deteriorated. Today pensioners make up 30 per cent of those living below the subsistence level. The economic panic about the old is further incited by the fast increasing number of the aged accompanied by a chronically low birth rate. Therefore, anxiety is growing that there will not be enough people to support the old: it will be increasingly difficult for the productive force of the active population to bear the material burden of an ageing society. Economic difficulties have, therefore, two aspects: they are a load test for the budget, since expenses grow even if pensions do not keep pace with rising inflation. On the other hand, since the state provides poorly for most of its pensioners, it will have to face the recurring problem of old age becoming a factor quasi-intensifying the pauperisation process.

Full employment and a radically transformed economic structure are sources of ~~x~~ further tensions: the old are of the villages and agriculture, while their children live in towns and work in industry. The burden of a physically and socially disintegrated cohesion poses another problem for the state. The old live in the settlements most poorly provided for, in small villages: the average age is very high in the neglected, undeveloped settlements and, these settlements are not developed because they are aged, and they are ageing because they are not developed - a vicious

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circle. 9,3 per cent of the population above 60 years live in ageing, and therefore neglected, villages. /The share of these settlements in the total number of population amounts to 7,6 per cent./ The average age of the dwellers of settlements of less than 1000 inhabitants is full three years above the national average. To stop the segregation of these settlements, institutions, health and social services are needed, therefore, even to provide for the daily necessities of life here presents a task of social policy.

Free national health service granted as a civic right is also full of tensions. As a consequence of prolonged lifetime, a state of life is present in masses, that demands more care and medical attendance. This lays additional burden upon the national health organisation already challenged by a number of new tasks, while its structure is inadaptive and obsolete. To all this is added the necessary inclusion of non-medical problems into the sphere of the health service, i.e. looking after the non-sick, unprovided for by social policy.

Panic, and bad conscience mingled with sentimentalism are, however, rooted not in economy alone, but also in history and social psychology.

Relations to the old may be formed by the refusal or the approval of the period in which they had an active

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part or which they represented. They may have built a world which justifies their existence and gives reason for respect and care for them, or one, that gives no ground for either. Does the past created by the old deserve recognition and praise or, instead, abuse and course? This is also a factor that shapes young generations' relationship with the old.

In old people's losing their roles and in the feelings aroused by them, a part is played also by the way, past events are judged, and by the differences in such judgements: what had been psychological, turned into social, and what had been social, turned into psychological: thus the natural refusal of parents by the young gets combined with the antagonistic feeling towards the social time represented by the parents, which "justifies" the frequent wrong done to the old: holding them responsible for social crimes. It is today's old, who lived and acted through the years leading up to the war, through fascism, then Stalinism in the fifties and, as systems changed, there was always the innocent new generation calling the old to account.

Social crimes or mistakes could be used also to make the revolt against parents complete with a social revolt, and to confirm the new generations' aims, existence, and identity in opposition to former ones. The consequences of all these feelings and contraversies are obvious in many instances, from actual measures ^{regarding the old,} ~~and conflicts~~ to differences in values.

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Frequently, bad relations are retaliated in treating the old, when the parents' power does not function as a social power, and when the old can do nothing more to defend themselves, driven out of any position of decision-making and deprived of any right of having a say.

The loss of power is made worse by that the disavowal of the past is turning against traditions at the same time.

The demand for, and cult of, novelty is permanent: value is attributed only to what is entirely new. Nothing can be modern, only what is different. The deeper-lying, economic-sociological cause of the search of novelty is the need to maintain reproduction in a consumer society, which feeds on technical novelties and is trained by incessant competition, in which it is glorified that has now yet been seen or used, in which being new is equivalent to being better, this equivalence permeating all values of the entire society.

The cult of youth is the product of this century, and old age has become a shame, a situation to be avoided and denied. The phenomenon is characteristic for and well-known about the United States, but other societies, including Hungary, are also not free from it.

The old have no competence in other spheres of life, either. What they have lived through, is not, or only partially, useful, and in many cases, an example expressly to be refused by the young. Especially if not only the generations but, simultaneously, society have undergone

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a sharp structural transformation in the last decades. Work or family, the bringing up of children, money-making, the normal daily rhythm of life, or any questions of where and how one should live and earn a living - all these are not continuous and cannot be taught, for traditions have lost their value. The way the old live is refused by their children: today's middle generation, and is also uncontinuable in masses, and the way the latter live is alien to the old.

The aged are, therefore, left to themselves. De facto, too, in living ^{on their own.} ~~and living~~ 22 per cent of those in the pensionable age live alone; almost every fourth. And they are left to themselves also if they do not live alone in the physical sense of the word. They are surrounded by a world, which has changed enormously in the last decades and what is worse, in which no patterns of old age, known yet from childhood at home, are present. Thus the feeling of social safeness of the aged is shaken. Their position in the modern world is problematic and repeatedly questioned, functions are missing for their prolonged life. The lengthened span of life has not brought with it renewed values of life, old age is not concomitant with quiet and peace, but with disquietude, social and private restlessness; it has not produced fulfilment, but the loss of self-confidence and of trust, combined with a feeling of unwantedness.

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For lack of new functions, the only way to hold out is the keeping of old ones as long as possible, i.e. the maintenance of an active role in life. This is also a material necessity. But it may be even more important, that this is the only way open for the old against losing their contacts, and keeping their position and dignity in this world. It is the lack of alternative ways that can explain, why the once so badly wanted pension - later on, when it became general, considered as a great achievement - arouses today in many the outcast feeling. Retirement, and the new, "inactive" phase of life beginning with it have become a source of fear for a lot of people. The basic conflict of old age is the loss of functions accompanied by a deterioration of health ^{on} the one hand and, - related to the former - by worsening financial conditions of life on the other. The social segmentation of the aged which, in extreme cases, can be described as total segregation, is coupled with a lack of culture of old age. This is, why the new situation offered by the prolonged span of life is necessarily experienced as a loss.

Protection against this loss is missing on a social scale. Old age has become a question of social policy and health services; its handling as such, cannot solve, however, but rather make worse the crisis outlined above. Any

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positive discrimination can only further harm social integration: the old are left to themselves or to one another, get segregated physically and in their relations, their cause is not theirs, but that of the institutions assigned for them. Their cause has no representation, at best, it is handled by some bureaucratic institutions specialised in attending to one or another partial task. Specialisation leaving intact the essential problems - loss of function and being outcasts- produces and reproduces a relationship of dependence, treating the old either in a bureaucratic, alienated manner, or paternally "looking after" them.*/

Can dependence be changed into mutuality?

At a time, when criticism turns against the over-bureaucratized welfare state and the overspending social policy in the West as well, as in our country, the forces that, notwithstanding, wish to settle the situation of the aged, are seeking alternative solutions. In the face of the burden, that old age represents, and of one-sided dependence, they proclaim a programme of mutuality. Is such a programme feasible?

*/ This criticism is concerned, of course, not only with the social policy institutions of the old, but with the functioning and attitude of modern social policy as a whole.

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Feasibility would be evident if relations between the old and the following generations could be described as symmetrical. Amid asymmetrical family and macro-social relations, mutuality is without means or grounds.

There can be no mutuality in work: the aged are inactive, driven out of any posts of importance and value, since they are approaching the end of their working life. Their "abrasion", so often mentioned, means that their strength and fitness are reduced.

There is not and cannot be mutuality in the financial exchange relations, either. The retired, having no property - which is a social fact in Hungary - are in the low-income bracket, a third belong even to the expressly poor.

Mutuality is not possible in health service, either, the aged being much more ill because of their physical and social wearing out. Therefore, their need for health service and medical care is higher than the average and what could be "returned".

Finally, no mutuality is possible within family relations, of which perhaps the most has been said. Since the aged bring home less money, than the active members of the family, and their activity at home, though valuable, is only secondary, according to the prevailing scale of values, their situation in the family cannot be based on an

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"equivalent exchange". Their "usefulness" can at most reduce their fear from becoming burdens and serves for defence against such accusations. In any case, the ideology, that prevailed in the active life of today's retired, attributed primary value to work done in the interest of the "whole community", while the family had only a secondary place: their duty was to increase social, and not individual welfare. Today they are expected to change, i.e. to reverse completely, from one day to the next, the fundamental principle of their life and to give priority to the family. And all this they should do at an age, in which flexibility towards changes is in any case on the wane.

The burden of sharp turns ^{e)} weighs heavier on men. Their mortality in the few years after retirement suddenly grows. Women are in a better position in this respect: the double burden carried in their active life /household and job/ turns into a defence against complete estrangement. /Data of the 1983 Demographic Yearbook show, that mortality rises in the three years following retirement by 43 per cent among men, and "only" by 30 per cent among women.^{vo}/

If, beyond what has been said, the fact is also taken into consideration, that with time passing the aged have to give up more and more even of what they had, when

^{vo} These are surprisingly big leaps in mortality rates, that should generate more thorough re-thinking of the interrelations of health and changes in social situation.

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starting their inactive life, the principle of synchronous mutuality becomes definitely an illusion.

Putting it sharply: the social process which awards the old - under the slogan of a "welldeserved rest", often an undeserved final stage of life - first drives them out of the solely honoured active life, then makes them superfluous, and in the end, qualifies their whole existence as a burden.

The question is always posed in asking "what the old cost the society". The other aspect is disregarded: "what did this society cost the old?"

And yet the only basis of mutuality can be the parallel posing of these two questions. The old have produced for their old age. Countries of different ideologies agree in taking into account only today's productivity, today's relations of give-and-take, the partakers of today's competition, its winners and losers. Human abilities embodied in already existing products /from machines or houses to knowledge/, the work of life of today's old are degraded and devaluated.

But this is necessarily the symmetrical basis of mutuality. So there is a time shift in mutuality. The old receive, in the course of their inactive existence, the countervalue of what they produced when young and active. The principle of mutuality can assert itself only in a life-cycle approach.

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The legalisation and legitimation of the principle are, however, to be waited for. The synchronous "little exchange" instead of the "large exchange" does not bring about real mutuality, it fails to create a veritable symmetry or to eliminate dependence.

We are well aware, that the elaboration of the economic, institutional, cultural-social-coexistence grounds of mutuality in our interpretation is a long-term objective and, if ever achieved, it can only be the result of a learning and adaptation process lasting through generations. Yet society must be made aware of it now. And it is also today's task to find alternative solutions of social policy for the grave crisis in the situation of the aged: in order to reduce poverty, estrangement, defenselessness and segregation, the civic right of old age must be recognised and institutionally guaranteed. The cause of the old has no adequate social representation today. The first step must be a well thought-out and institutional assumption of the whole matter, such as is apt: to lay the grounds of human relations based on solidarity and dignity instead of day-to-day social policy corrections made like emergency measures; to elaborate a policy, that will focus not on casting, but rather, on integrating the old.