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# CONCEPTUALIZING AGEISM IN PARALLEL TO SEXISM AND RACISM

## The heuristic value and limitations of a common analytical framework

**By Juliette Rennes**

Some people may live their whole lives without directly experiencing racism or sexism. They are however likely at least once to have been considered *too old* to take part in some activity or other, to attend certain events, or to be eligible for an age-related benefit. This exclusion may be based on legal age limits or on social norms defining suitable activities at different ages. Is it appropriate to define such exclusion as a form of *ageism* comparable to sexism and racism? This question can be explored from a number of different research angles. Legal theory can be used to examine the conditions under which age, like gender and ethnoracial status, can be illegitimately used as grounds for treating people differently, i.e. for discrimination. Social theory can be used as a basis to investigate the extent to which age, just like gender and racialization, is a vector for relations of stigmatization and domination. Those of us involved in campaigning against ageism or writing the history of such struggles instead tend to examine the way in which feminist and/or anti-racist causes are or have been sources of inspiration for anti-ageist struggles, or how they might provide such inspiration for the future.

Since the 1970s, references to sexism and racism have been a constant feature in the emergence and development of empirical and theoretical studies of ageism and campaigns against age-related prejudice in North America and Western Europe. As a common framework for combating discrimination was gradually created, political and legal theory began to highlight the "singularity of age" [1] as opposed to what it shares with discrimination based on gender and ethnoracial status. This necessary work of clarifying what is particular to age should not, however, lead us to forget the heuristic impact that references to and borrowings from work on sexism and racism have had on the development of knowledge about age-related exclusion. Understanding this exclusion through an anti-discriminatory framework has radically transformed its status: largely perceived prior to this as the justified, inevitable consequence of an inescapable biological fact (aging), such exclusion has gradually been problematized as unjust, i.e. as constituting a sociological and political issue.

It is this process of sociologization and politicization that is the focus of the present article. In the first section I describe the emergence during the 1970s of ageism as an activist issue, and the transposition of the common framework for analyzing gender and race discrimination to age discrimination; in the second section I explain the logic used to argue for analogies between sexism, racism, and ageism, since these analogies, while recurrent in advocacy against ageism, often appear in an allusive and diffuse manner. The third section

1. Axel Gosseries, "La singularité de l'âge: réflexions sur la jurisprudence communautaire," *Mouvements* 59 (2009), 42-54.

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demonstrates that these analogies operate in different ways when analyzing age as a tool for the *hierarchical categorization of individuals* and when analyzing age as a *dimension in social relationships*, two elements that are rarely distinguished from one another in accounts of ageism. Finally, while highlighting the differences between age relations and class, gender, and racialization relations, the article argues that the last three should be taken into account in order to understand age-related prejudice from an intersectional rather than analogical perspective. Put differently, individuals are more likely to experience such prejudice the more they are situated in a dominated position in terms of gender, class, and ethnoracial status. However, as we shall see, being in a privileged position in terms of those relations does not necessarily mean escaping ageism completely.

## Feminism, anti-racism, and anti-ageism in the 1970s

Reflections on the commonalities between hierarchical distinctions based on gender and race date back at least to the late nineteenth century. [1] From the 1960s in the United States, and beginning some thirty years later in France, the legal logic of the "commutativity of the criteria" of discrimination [2] operationalized these analogies in the form of a common anti-discriminatory framework. Without preventing research into the differences between gender and racial discrimination, [3] this common framework also encouraged the development of a shared emotional grammar for understanding them: the experience of racism was thought to raise awareness of that of sexism, and vice versa. This line of reasoning has also been widely used in relation to ageism: "When you become old, you become black," as the black American writer Walter Mosley has declared, for example: "[you] realize what it is to be pushed aside [...] the experience that black people have had in America forever." [4] The emergence of this framework for analysis and action is the focus of the first section of this article, which explores how the anti-ageist cause was shaped in relation to feminism and anti-racism.

## Age through the lens of the anti-discrimination paradigm in the United States

The first definition—if not the first use—of the term "ageism" is attributed to Robert Butler, in an article published in 1969. [5] In this text the American gerontologist analyzed the then-recent campaign waged by residents of a Washington neighborhood against the creation of a low-cost housing project for the elderly, including African Americans. Butler attempts to analytically isolate within this example, which he describes as a "complex interweaving of class, color and age discrimination," [6] the specific attitudes of hostility toward

1. Particularly in the United States: see Serena Mayeri, *Reasoning from Race: Feminism, Law, and the Civil Rights Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
2. Didier Fassin, "L'invention française de la discrimination," *Revue française de science politique* 52, no. 4 (August 2002), 403–23 (412).
3. Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?," *Noûs* 34, no. 1 (2000) 31–55.
4. Walter Mosley, Radio interview on "Talk of The Nation," NPR, January 26, 2012, quoted in Ashton Applewhite, *This Chair Rocks. A Manifesto against Ageism* (New York: Networked Books, 2016), 35.
5. Robert Butler, "Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry," *The Gerontologist* 9, no. 4 (1969), 243–46.
6. *Ibid.*, 243.

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"old *folks,*" *given that* the advanced age of the future residents was one of the elements that residents judged particularly negatively. Butler coined the term "ageism," by analogy with sexism and racism, to describe these negative reactions. His 1975 definition of ageism as "a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism or sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender" [1] came to be the one most widely employed in work on ageism over the following decades.

Insofar as this definition overlooks what may be specific about ageism in favor of focusing on what it shares with sexism and racism, it may, as British sociologist Bill Bytheway suggests, be considered unfinished or incomplete, since "an equivalence" cannot serve as the sole "basis for a definition." [2] In his 1969 article, Butler defined ageism as "*prejudice* by one age group toward other age groups," [3] thus dispensing with references to gender and race. But it is its definition by analogy with racism and sexism (and centered on *old* age, a point to which I shall return) that became widespread and well-established. I use the term analogy—rather than "equivalence," as in Bytheway's work—because of the way in which Butler compares several relations: relations between old and non-old people, between men and women, and between whites and ethnoracial minorities, all described in terms of "systematic stereotyping [...] and discrimination." [4] This analogy had a recent precedent: in 1967, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, the first piece of US legislation passed prohibiting discrimination against "older" workers (those over forty), drew inspiration from the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, or sex in organizations with fifteen or more employees. [5] From the mid-1960s, the social sciences also began to draw on theories of racism and sexism to describe, understand, and analyze by analogy prejudice based on old age, and to examine whether it was appropriate to describe the elderly as a "minority." [6]

While much of this work compared the experience of ageism to that of sexism and racism, rather than exploring how such experience is itself shaped by inequalities of class, gender, and ethnoracial status, this latter perspective was present in early anti-ageist campaigning. In 1970, in Philadelphia, the Consultation of Older and Younger Adults for Social Change collective—created by Maggie Kuhn (1905–95), a young retiree involved at the time with feminist and pacifist causes—sought explicitly to link anti-ageism with anti-racism and struggles against class and gender inequality. [7] Kuhn and her colleagues (the majority retired women) joined forces, for example, with the National Caucus on the Black Aged, set up by Hobart C. Jackson, the African-American director of a geriatric center in Philadelphia. The two collectives led joint campaigns to draw attention to the lack of socioeconomic resources

1. Robert Butler, *Why Survive? Being Old in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 12.
2. Bill Bytheway, *Ageism* (Bristol: Open University Press, 1995), 117.
3. Butler, "Age-ism," 243.
4. Strictly speaking, reasoning by analogy consists in establishing an "identity between the relationships that unite the terms of two or more pairs with one another" (A is to B, what A' is to B', where A and A' are said to be homologous with B and B'). André Lalande, "Analogy," in *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 2006 [1926]), 51.
5. Howard C. Eglit, "L'âge dans le monde du travail aux États-Unis," *Retraite et société* 51 (2007), 43–75.
6. Gordon Streib, "Are the Aged a Minority Group?," in *Applied Sociology*, eds. Alvin Gouldner and Seymour Miller (New York: Free Press, 1965); Erdman B. Palmore and Kenneth Manton, "Ageism Compared to Racism and Sexism," *Journal of Gerontology* 28, no. 3 (1973), 363–69; Sharon McIrvin Abu-Laban and Baha Abu-Laban, "Women and the Aged as Minority Groups: A Critique," *Canadian Review of Sociology* 14, no. 1 (1977), 103–16.
7. Carroll Estes and Elena Portacolone, "Maggie Kuhn: Social Theorist of Radical Gerontology," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 29, nos. 1–2 (2009), 15–26.

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among older black men and women and the discrimination they faced in accessing the health care system. In 1971, they held the Black House Conference on Aging, in Washington, which was attended by over 800 people and led to a public challenge to the more official White House Conference on Aging (WHCA), which was accused of approaching policies for the elderly from the sole point of view of the white middle and upper classes. This appeal was accompanied by a raft of ninety demands for improving the situation of older black men and women. [1] In 1972, Kuhn's movement—after spreading through numerous local committees in major cities across the country—changed its name to the Gray Panthers. This reference to the African-American revolutionary group the Black Panthers, founded in 1966, explicitly demonstrates solidarity between the anti-ageist and anti-racist causes.

Over the course of the same decade, feminist thinkers in the United States began to problematize ageism as a dimension of sexism: works of this period highlighted the everyday ageist prejudices that the young women of Women's Lib reproduced in their relations with older women, within a movement that was supposed to forge a political identity shared by all women. [2] "Those of you who are younger see us as men see us: that is, as women who used to be women but aren't any more," said feminist Barbara Macdonald in 1985, when she was 72. [3] In a seminal article published in 1972, Susan Sontag analyzed the "double standard of aging": the fact that a mature man from the dominant classes is socially valued, while a woman of the same age and social background is perceived as a lesser version of the young woman she once was. Linked to this process, according to Sontag, the conjugal norm of young women pairing up with older, more "experienced" men contributes to the reproduction of male domination. [4] During the 1980s and 1990s, the role of age in perpetuating inequalities between women and men became a field of sociological investigation in itself, albeit one on the fringes of both gender studies and life course sociology. [5]

## France: From the denunciation of "anti-elderly racism" to that of "youthism"

In France, the term "ageism" did not become widespread until the 1990s, but in the 1970s use of the expression "anti-elderly racism [*racisme antivieux*]" [6] reflected the development of a critical discourse on the social exclusion of older people inspired by the denunciation of other forms of segregation and discrimination. In 1970, in her essay *The Coming of Age* [*La vieillesse*], Simone de Beauvoir drew a parallel between the way in which women of all ages and the elderly of both sexes were set up as "Others" in relation to a standard individual,

1. Roger Sanjek, *Gray Panthers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011 [2009]), 26–27; Martha Monaghan Corpus, "Gray Panthers Movement," in *Encyclopedia of American Social Movements*, vol. 4, ed. Immanuel Ness (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2005), 1230–35.
2. Myrna I. Lewis and Robert N. Butler, "Why Is Women's Lib Ignoring Old Women?," *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 3, no. 3 (1972), 223–31; Baba Copper, *Over the Hill: Reflections on Ageism Between Women* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1988).
3. Barbara MacDonald, "Outside the Sisterhood: Ageism in Women's Studies," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 25, nos. 1–2 (1997), 47–52 (47).
4. Susan Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging," *The Saturday Review*, 23 September 1972, 29–38.
5. Judith A. Levy, ed., "Gender and Aging," *The Sociological Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (1988); Sara Arber and Jay Ginn, eds., *Connecting Gender and Ageing: A Sociological Approach* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995).
6. See, for example, Marie-Hélène Adler, *Passeport pour le troisième âge* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1974), 28–29; Yves Florenne, "La vie commence à soixante ans," *Le Monde*, May 9, 1977.

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generally male and middle-aged. [1] This critical viewpoint is common to many 1970s initiatives on old age in France. In 1976, Dominique Le Vaguerèse, then a young psychologist and social worker in an intergenerational support center for the elderly, close to the anti-psychiatry movement and an activist in the Unified Socialist Party (PSU), created *Mathusalem, le journal qui n'a pas peur des vieux* (*Methuselah: The journal that is not afraid of old people*). Although this magazine adopted an iconoclastic and provocative tone and illustrations, it nonetheless voiced specific criticisms of the expert discourse on the "third age," and aimed to give a voice to the elderly themselves to speak about their situation, in part following the example of the American Gray Panthers movement, whose campaigns were reported in *Mathusalem*. [2] Moreover, the magazine scrutinized what is "common to the struggle of women ('the biological *petite différence*') and the struggle of the elderly ('inescapable biological destiny')," [3] while reflecting on how the two might come together in a context where the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (French Women's Liberation Movement) had shown little interest in the issue of old age. [4] In 1979, this question was taken up again in the discussion groups and short-lived journal of a small feminist collective of women over fifty, Les Mûres Prennent la Parole (Older Women Speak Up). [5]

Over the course of this decade, work on sexism and racism was also used in France to think about how children and young people are rendered inferior by non-elderly adults. Used in this context, the neologism "youthism [*jeunisme*]" did not have its current meaning—the cult of youth and the superior status conferred on young people—but rather designated a form of "anti-young" ageism. This was the meaning attributed to the term in 1975 by Roger-Gérard Schwartzenberg, then an editorial writer for *Le Monde*, in a frequently cited article: "First there was racism, a contempt for certain supposedly inferior races. Then there was sexism, discrimination based on sex, which relegates women to subordinate roles. Now there is youthism, or hatred of the young, which is spreading like a new moral and social plague." [6] This denunciation of "youthism," understood as the stigmatization of the young as a social group, was part of a wider movement, emerging in the wake of May 1968, to challenge all relationships of authority based on age difference. From the 1970s to the 1990s, feminists took up these issues and established a relationship between the minoritization of women and of children within the patriarchal family. [7] Their analyses were continued in the 2010s by libertarian activist and thinker Yves Bonnardel, who denounced adult domination and the "oppression of minors" as "ageist." [8]

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York and London: Norton, 1996); Harm-Peer Zimmermann, "Alienation and Alterity: Age in The Existentialist Discourse on Others," *Journal of Aging Studies* 39 (2016), 83–95.
2. "Femmes et vieux aux USA: les panthères grises," *Mathusalem, le journal qui n'a pas peur des vieux* 5 (1977), 11–12.
3. "Lutte des vieux et lutte des femmes, va-ton se tromper de combat?," *Mathusalem, le journal qui n'a pas peur des vieux* 3, special issue on "Women" (1976), 12.
4. *Mathusalem, le journal qui n'a pas peur des vieux* 5, Special issue on "Feminism and Aging" (1977).
5. Anne-Marie Pavillard, "Entretien avec Arlette Moch-David [fondatrice du groupe Les Mûres prennent la parole]," *Archives du féminisme* 22 (2014).
6. Roger-Gérard Schwartzenberg, "Le jeunisme," *Le Monde*, October 23, 1975.
7. Christiane Rochefort, *Les enfants d'abord* (Paris: Grasset, 1976); Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), chapter 4, 'Down with Childhood'. This feminist text, first published in 1970 in English (in Canada), was translated into French in 1972. Christine Delphy, "L'état d'exception: la dérogation au droit commun comme fondement de la sphère privée," *Nouvelles questions féministes* 16, no. 4 (1995), 73–114.
8. Yves Bonnardel, *La domination adulte. L'oppression des mineurs* (Méréville: Myriadis, 2015), 17–18 and 182.

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This use of the term testifies to the fact that, at the time Bonnardel's book was published, ageism no longer referred only to the prejudice against the elderly that had prompted Butler to coin the word in 1969, but to "all forms of discrimination, segregation, and hatred based on age." [1] In European anti-discrimination law, the directive of November 27, 2000 (implemented in France in 2001) established age as one of the possible grounds for illegitimate discriminative treatment, without mentioning any particular age group, unlike the 1967 Age Discrimination Act in the United States, which specifically targeted those over forty. However, while "ageism" is becoming increasingly commonplace as a term to describe any discrimination based on age, the vast majority of investigations and campaigns that use the term continue to focus on cases of people discriminated against because of their perceived advanced age. [2] In other words, the "subject" for whom the fight against ageism is waged is sometimes of indeterminate age, and sometimes defined by the stigma of old age. This tension, to which I shall return, has no equivalent in feminism or anti-racism, and ought to be explored in relation to all of the specific features of anti-ageist advocacy.

## Age distinctions as a challenge to the norm of equality

The fact that victims of ageism cannot be assigned a specific position in terms of age relations is sometimes seen as an indication that this activist issue lacks political consistency. This judgement usually takes as its yardstick the struggles of women, workers, and ethnoracial minorities, who occupy a stable position in asymmetrical social relationships. In this section, I propose to suspend any such standard and instead explore the internal coherence of anti-ageist claims for equal treatment. I will then specify what studies of ageism have borrowed from studies of sexism and racism: not so much the understanding of gender and racialization as power relations between stable groups (a point to which I shall return), but rather an analysis in terms of stigmatizing categorizations that have performative effects upon their victims.

## The specific features of anti-ageist struggles

Rooted in denunciation of the social exclusion of those categorized as old, discussions of and campaigns about ageism rapidly led to a broader critique of normative representations of the life course in contemporary capitalist societies. The model of a three-stage biographical journey (education, work, and retirement) represented metaphorically by a pyramid with the non-elderly, productive, reproductive, and supposedly autonomous adult at its summit, goes hand-in-hand with a representation of children as unfinished beings whose purpose is to become adults, and of older adults as no longer fully adult once they have ceased to engage in paid productive activity. [3] The common opposition between "adults" and "the

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1. Definition from the French Observatory of Ageism created in 2008, quoted in Richard Vercauteren, *Dictionnaire de la gérontologie sociale. Vieillissement et vieillesse* (Toulouse: ERES, 2011), 25. See also Bytheway, *Ageism*, 14; Applewhite, *This Chair Rocks*, 8.
2. Juliette Rennes, "Unpacking Age as a Category: Chronological Age, Life Stage, and Bodily Aging in Age-Based Prejudice," trans. Kate Throssell, *Revue française de sociologie* 60, no. 2 (2019), 257–84.
3. Jenny Hockey and Allison James, *Growing Up and Growing Old: Ageing and Dependency in the Life Course* (London: Sage, 1993).

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elderly," and between "adulthood" and "old age," in order to distinguish between employed and retired adults, bears witness to the seldom-questioned identification of adulthood with productive status.

This model of the life course—hegemonic, albeit not universal [1]—operates in tandem with a sociospatial separation by age group that has been consolidated over the last century through the institutionalization of different school and preschool ages, the widespread presence of institutions for the elderly, and the organization of leisure activities by age group. [2] This is the second strand of the anti-ageist critique: since such separation drastically limits experiences and activities shared by people of different ages, it encourages the othering of "old people" and the perpetuation of ageist prejudices. [3] It is no coincidence that the Gray Panthers initially called themselves the Consultation of Older and Younger Adults for Social Change, and placed the creation of intergenerational spaces and activities at the center of their campaigns, as did most later anti-ageist movements. [4]

This advocacy of age-mixing does not radically differentiate anti-ageism from feminist and anti-racist struggles, which are also directed against both discrimination and segregation (racial and gendered). There is however a notable difference between anti-ageism and these two other struggles: while the latter have in common the demand for equality "regardless" (of sex or race) in almost all areas of social life (except where they call for affirmative action to *compensate for* the discrimination suffered by women and ethnoracial minorities), the demand for equality "regardless of age" is far more limited and targeted. It is possible to fight ageism while acknowledging that differences in physical development, capacity, maturity, or discernment between people of different ages justify the institutionalization of age distinctions in areas of social life where gender and race distinctions would be considered illegitimate. For example, it is widely accepted that the effects of alcohol consumption are on average more harmful to a child's health than to an adult's, and that it is therefore fair to prohibit alcohol consumption on the basis of age, whereas it would be considered unfair to prohibit it on the basis of gender, skin color, origin, or sexual orientation. It is also generally considered legitimate to prevent abuses of power by adults over children and, from this perspective, to prohibit adults from marrying or having sexual relations with a child "regardless of age," whereas French law now permits these same practices between adults regardless of sex, nationality, religion, or skin color. And while there are debates about the appropriate age threshold for sexual majority, as for ages of political and criminal majority and age thresholds in labor law, the actual principle of age distinctions in these various areas is rarely questioned.

Anti-ageism leads in fact to a denunciation, not so much of the principle of age distinction itself, but of the arbitrary nature of certain distinctions. What these distinctions have in common is that they exclude individuals, on the basis of age, from accessing social goods that anti-ageists instead consider appropriate to the capacities, aptitudes, interests, or needs of the persons thus excluded. [5] This exclusion may be the product of *legal age barriers* that

1. On representations of the life course without a hierarchy of stages of existence, see Michel Philibert, *L'échelle des âges* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), 95.
2. Annick Percheron and René Remond, eds., *Âge et politique* (Paris: Économica, 1991).
3. Gunhild O. Hagestad and Peter Uhlenberg, "The Social Separation of Old and Young: A Root of Ageism," *Journal of Social Issues* 61, no. 2 (2005), 343-60.
4. Sanjek, *Gray Panthers*.
5. Rennes, "Unpacking Age as a Category."

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restrict access to training, jobs, services, leisure activities, or benefits: [1] anti-discrimination law is then used as a resource to attack the illegitimacy of positive law, as was previously the case in the denunciation of the legal criterion of sex or, even today, nationality. [2] Or it may result from individual decisions without any legal justification: in the employment sphere, perhaps a failure to recruit or to promote, dismissal, demotion, or preventing access to vocational training on the grounds of age, without the capacities of the individuals thus excluded having been assessed; in the medical sphere, refusing to treat a person because they are deemed too old, even though such treatment would be beneficial to them. [3] Finally, this exclusion may be the result of *indirect* discrimination against persons of a certain age group. A lack of alternatives to stairways in the metro, or means other than steps to get on and off the sidewalk, or a lack of benches to sit on in public places, for example, all indicate urban planning designed with able-bodied adults, and not elderly people, in mind. This type of public policy tends to ignore the needs and aspirations of the older segment of the population and of individuals of all ages with disabilities, as opposed to producing more inclusive and caring spaces, described as "*age/disability friendly*." [4]

To denounce such discrimination is to judge that there is as little justification for using one's stage in the aging process to justify differential treatment, whether direct or indirect, as there is for using other bodily characteristics, whether permanent or temporary, such as one's state of health, pregnancy, height, weight, skin color, or assigned sex at birth. However, from the point of view of anti-discrimination law, age distinctions may occasionally be acceptable, for example in employment, when they are "objectively and reasonably justified by a legitimate aim" (such as balancing the age pyramid in a company)—something that constitutes a "unique feature of the age criterion" compared to other grounds for differential treatment. [5] The fact remains that the obligation to *justify* any differential treatment based upon age (considered therefore as a *derogation* from equal treatment) is a completely unprecedented extension of the norm of equality. Such an extension clashes with the logic broadly reflected in the contemporary system of dealing with age—that of the *successive* access of different age groups to certain social goods (training, employment, social benefits, legal capacity, etc.). According to this logic, persons of different ages are formally equal in terms of their life as a whole (they will have had successive access to the same rights at the same age), but this diachronic equality involves synchronic inequality (at a given moment, a twenty-year-old, for example, has legal access to training that remains closed to a sixty-year-old). It is this very principle, which consists in justifying inequalities in synchronicity via equality in diachronicity, that is critically examined in work on ageism. [6]

1. See in particular the deliberations of the Haute Autorité de Lutte Contre les Discriminations (Halde) (French High Authority against Discrimination): No. 2006-62 of April 3, 2006; No. 2007-248 of October 1, 2007; No. 2009-146 and 147 of April 6, 2009; No. 2009-116 of March 2, 2009; No, 2009-208 of May 18, 2009, which can be consulted in the Défenseur des Droits database.
2. Juliette Rennes, "Legal Distinctions or Discriminations? Political Strategies and Epistemological Challenges," *Politix* 94 (2011), 35–57.
3. Vincent J. Roscigno *et al.*, "Age Discrimination, Social Closure and Employment," *Social Forces* 86, no. 1 (2007), 313–34; Marie Mercat-Bruns, ed., "La discrimination fondée sur l'âge dans l'emploi," *Retraite et société* 51, special issue (2007); Robert L. Kane and Rosalie A. Kane, "Ageism in Healthcare and Long-Term Care," *Generations* 29, no. 3 (2005), 49–54.
4. Tine Buffel, Sophie Handler, and Chris Phillipson, eds., *Age-Friendly Cities: A Global Perspective* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2018).
5. European Directive of November 27, 2000; Gosseries, "La singularité de l'âge."
6. Richard Wagland, "Age, Equality and Cultural Oppression: An Argument against Ageism" (PhD diss., Brunel University, 2004).

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Feminists would not be happy with a marriage contract that stipulated that during the first half of the marriage the husband would have all the benefits, and during the second half the arrangement would be reversed. [1] For such a contract would not allow one to *experience situations of equality*. From an anti-ageist perspective, equal treatment considered arithmetically, across the scale of an entire life, poses the same type of problem. If one is entitled to the same justice successively rather than simultaneously with persons of other generations who are alive in the same period as oneself, it is difficult to experience this as equality with them. Such a situation encourages othering based on the age gap, which as we have seen is a component of ageism. In opposition to an "us and them" generational divide, there is a need to forge new categorical pairs in which the "us" cuts across age ranges: us, people living in a given neighborhood, *vs.* speculators; us, the "99%" *vs.* the "richest 1%"; or us, users of public services *vs.* local government, to refer to one of the Gray Panthers' campaigns against public transport budget cuts in Philadelphia.

If the principle of the successive equality of persons of different ages is considered inadequate from an anti-ageist perspective, we must then ask which social goods should be accessible to all simultaneously regardless of age, and for which we can justify successive access for persons of different age groups. In some situations, the scarcity of the goods to be distributed seems to make an "age-neutral" distribution impossible: in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, for example, it may seem justified to reserve scarce goods such as respirators and hospital beds for the youngest rather than the oldest in order to maximize the former's chances of living for as long as the latter have already lived. In other words, a diachronic principle of "longevity equalization" can be invoked here to justify unequal synchronic treatment. [2] However, work on ageism encourages us to question this moral dilemma further upstream, by examining the conditions under which it occurs in the first place: how did rich societies, equipped with a high-performing healthcare system, end up making hospital beds and respirators scarce goods? [3] Isn't there indirect ageism in public policies to reduce health spending that, in a crisis, lead to the sacrifice of the oldest and most vulnerable people—policies that are not adequately formulated to recognize the equal value of lives, whatever their age? A similar question may be asked of the idea that there is a fixed and limited "stock" of jobs to be distributed, invoked both against foreign workers and in order to justify the early retirement of "older" workers against their will. An anti-ageist perspective encourages us to question the political choices that contribute to producing this scarcity of jobs to be distributed, and in particular the principle of the intense concentration of working life into a limited period of adult life. [4] In other words, it involves discussing, from a normative egalitarian position, the advantages and disadvantages traditionally associated with the different conventional stages of the life course, and of denaturalizing forms of hierarchical categorization of persons according to their position in these

1. This contract is imagined by the philosopher Dennis McKerlie, in "Equality between Age-Groups," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 21, no. 3 (1992), 275–95, to show the limits of equality considered solely on the scale of entire lives.
2. Axel Gosseries, "Trois questions éthiques sur la place des plus âgés dans la pandémie," *The Conversation*, March 26, 2020.
3. Margaret M. Gullette, "Ageist 'Triage' Is a Crime against Humanity," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 21, 2020.
4. Applewhite, *This Chair Rocks*, 149. These reflections are to some extent explored in Éric Deschavanne and Pierre-Henri Tavoillot, *Philosophie des âges de la vie. Pourquoi grandir? Pourquoi vieillir?* (Paris: Grasset, 2011), section 3, although the book does not explicitly address the debate on ageism.

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stages. The following subsection examines the way in which such critical work has been inspired by studies of gender and race-based categorizations.

## The conceptualization of hierarchical categorizations based on age

Research on discrimination establishes a relationship between the way in which certain types of people are repeatedly subjected to unfavorable differential treatment on the basis of their supposed membership of a group and the nature of the properties attributed to this group, i.e. the forms of "stereotyping" used to categorize it. However, we also know that categorizing a person on the basis of their age, gender, religion, nationality, origin, or professional status in order to infer that they possess a particular characteristic attributed to members of this category is an everyday operation that does not necessarily imply discriminatory practices. [1] This type of categorization helps us to orientate ourselves in social life and to interact with strangers: if a child is eight years old, I may assume that they like or dislike such and such a game, or know or do not know of such and such a historical event, depending on the properties I attribute to the category "eight-year-old."

This process of categorization does of course involve a risk of homogenization and reductionism, as we may end up perceiving in individuals of a single category only the common traits that they are supposed to embody. This is what Simone de Beauvoir points out about the category "child" in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (*Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*): "The condescension of grown-ups turns children into a general species whose individual members are all alike: nothing exasperated me more than this. Once at La Grillière, as I was eating some cobnuts, the elderly lady who was Madeleine's governess announced fatuously: 'All children adore nuts.' [...] My personal tastes were not dictated by my age; I was not a 'child': I was me, myself." [2] However, the property used in the writer's example here (the taste of cobnuts) does not have negative connotations, unlike the categorical properties that Butler cites as being associated with old people who, he says, are "categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old-fashioned in morality and skills [...]" [3] To designate this type of categorization, which attributes blameworthy or despicable behavior to the categorized group, we can use the vocabulary of stigmatization or negative labelling, rather than the broader term "stereotyping." [4]

This labelling is defined by the fact that it is accompanied by the presumption that the labelled group will necessarily have behaviors that are disparaged (since she is a girl, she will not be able to climb that wall; if this child is Romani, he cannot be trusted; since she is an old woman, what she says will be boring). It encourages discriminatory practices against the person while simultaneously legitimizing them. [5] In line with Erving Goffman's research on the management of stigmatized differences, sociology and social psychology studies have

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1. Lena Jayusi, *Catégorisation et ordre moral* (Paris: Economica, 2010 [1984]).
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2001), 60. Quoted in Bonnardel, *La domination adulte*, 149.
3. Butler, *Why Survive*, 12.
4. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin, 1990 [1963]); Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders* (London: Sage, 1994 [1965]); Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1997 [1963]).
5. Linda Hamilton Krieger, *Un problème de catégories. Stéréotypes et lutte contre les discriminations* (New York and Paris: French-American Foundation/Sciences Po, 2008).

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shown that, in everyday interactions, members of stigmatized groups find that the slightest slip tends to confirm unfavorable expectations of them, rather than being seen as merely incidental.[1] In the case of age, for example, a minor oversight by a person categorized as elderly, even if it is not known whether it is an isolated occurrence or not, will readily be interpreted as confirmation of an age-related cognitive problem, whereas an oversight by a younger person is more likely to be seen as owing to mere distraction.[2] Similarly, a slight wavering, a hesitation on a word, a pause, or a small misunderstanding can all be perceived as signs of auditory, visual, motor, intellectual, or verbal incapacity, even if these capacities have not been tested.[3] A common objection to the transposition of this framework for analyzing discrimination to age is that these age presumptions are based in biological reality, i.e. the decline in faculties associated with aging, and that behaviors that make distinctions on the basis of age are therefore justified. This type of argument is more generally used to support "statistical" discrimination, motivated by the proven existence of a statistical correlation between belonging to a certain group and being endowed with a characteristic that ought to be taken into account when addressing the issue under consideration.[4]

Work on ageism offers two types of response to this argument. The first is empirical: we know that the pace and manifestations of aging depend on genetic inheritance, diet, biographical, professional, and medical trajectories, and living conditions, meaning that statistical averages on aging for the same age group gloss over too many interindividual differences to be truly relevant. These interindividual differences are even more striking among "older people," a category that can include those as young as sixty-five and as old as a hundred and five, yet which is customarily seen as implying common "age-related" characteristics in terms of health status and abilities. Finally, during the aging process, the decline of certain faculties is accompanied by practices of adaptation and compensation that make it very difficult to predict abilities linked to age.[5]

The second type of response is consequentialist: presumptions of age-related incapacity are problematic because of their performative dimension, in the sense that they contribute to creating the conditions for their own confirmation. When we act on someone's behalf because we presume them to be incapacitated (because of their age, but also because of their sex, ethnoracial characteristics, or social origin), we tend to reinforce these presupposed incapacities by preventing them from developing such abilities. Among the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, women who were systematically prohibited from making the slightest physical effort on account of their supposed lack of physical strength did indeed become frail. As for the incapacities attributed to children, some of them are partly produced by the contemporary sociopolitical and legal system of ages, which limits the autonomy, responsibility, and "legal capacity" of children (as is conversely highlighted *when we look at* what children were capable of in other eras).[6] More broadly, the prevalence of norms defining what is appropriate or possible at a

1. Goffman, *Stigma*, 58.
2. Wendy V. Parr and Richard Siegert, "Adults' Conceptions of Everyday Memory Failures in Others: Factors That Mediate the Effects of Target Age," *Psychology and Aging* 8, no. 4 (1993), 599–605.
3. Monisha Pasupathi and Corinna E. Löckenhoff, "Ageist Behavior," in *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older Persons*, ed. Todd D. Nelson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 201–46.
4. For an overview and discussion of this notion, coined by economists Edmund Phelps and Kenneth Arrow, see Magali Bessone and Daniel Sabbagh, "Les discriminations raciales, un objet philosophique," in *Race, racisme, discrimination. Anthologie de textes fondamentaux*, eds. Bessone and Sabbagh (Paris: Hermann, 2015), 29sq.
5. Yves Joanette *et al.*, "Vieillir: déclin ou changement?," in *L'âgisme. Comprendre et changer le regard social sur le vieillissement*, ed. Martine Lagacé (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2011), 113–31.
6. Pascale Garnier, *Ce dont les enfants sont capables. Marcher XVIIIe, travailler XIXe, nager XXe* (Paris: Métailié, 1995).

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certain age can lead children to think themselves too young to participate in an activity at which they might prove quite capable. This process of internalizing "age-related disabilities" also applies at a more advanced age, for example when individuals lose opportunities to develop autonomy in medicalized "old people's" institutions, or end up judging themselves as too old to participate in an otherwise appealing activity.

If ageism can indeed be "internalized," [1] it is because it is embedded in institutional systems, legal rules, public policies, and cultural representations that are imposed on and passed onto individuals and, like racism and sexism, cannot therefore be reduced to individual prejudice. [2] In the empirical research documenting this systemic dimension of ageism, symbolic production, and in particular the equation between aging and decline, has been a particular focus of study since the 1990s. [3] Here again, an emphasis on the obscuring—or "symbolic annihilation" [4]—of the perspective and experience of ethnoracial and sexual minorities and women in the media has provided a framework for questioning ageism in the media and visual culture. Studies show, from a qualitative perspective, how older adults tend to be assigned a limited number of stereotypical roles, and how old age is disregarded, and, from a quantitative perspective, that these older adults are generally under-represented in relation to their proportion within the population. [5] Meanwhile, looking at the sociology of cultural and artistic professions from the point of view of age has made it possible to link the question of "representations" with professional issues of ageism for those (especially women) who, because they are considered too old, struggle to find work in television, cinema, or advertising. [6]

All these experiences of discrimination, both direct and indirect, and institutional and interactional, can drive individuals to conceal their advancing age. As we shall see, work on strategies for avoiding other forms of discrimination has once again proved to be of heuristic value in understanding this process.

The victims and beneficiaries of ageism

Trying to pass as younger than one's real age is one of the common strategies employed by individuals in order to avoid ageism. But anti-ageist activists suggest a different approach to the problem: acknowledging one's advanced age, or even proclaiming it, while fighting the stigma associated with this label. This politicization of age identities raises the question of the political subject of anti-ageist struggles: does the comparison with sexism and racism remain appropriate when it comes to understanding not hierarchical categorizations based on age, but the asymmetrical relations between those perceived as having no specific age

1. J. Brook Bouson, *Shame and the Aging Woman: Confronting and Resisting Ageism in Contemporary Women's Writings* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 152–54.

2. Robert Butler, "Ageism: A Foreword," *Journal of Social Issues* 36, no. 2 (1980), 8–11.

3. Margaret M. Gullette, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997); Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick, eds., *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life* (London: Routledge, 1995).

4. Gaye Tuchman, "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media," in *Culture and Politics: A Reader*, eds. Lane Crothers and Charles Lockhart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000 [1978]), 150–74.

5. Eugene Loos and Ivan Loredana, "Visual Ageism in the Media," in *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism*, eds. Liat Ayalon and Clemens Tesch-Römer (Cham: Springer Open, 2018), 163–76.

6. Anne E. Lincoln and Michael P. Allen, "Double Jeopardy in Hollywood: Age and Gender in the Careers of Film Actors, 1926–1999," *Sociological Forum* 19, no. 4 (2004), 611–31; Deborah Dean, "Age, Gender and Performer Employment in Europe," report, International Federation of Actors, 2008.

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and those who are "age-ized," i.e. seen as inferior because of their age? [1] In order to assess the continued relevance of the analogy, this final section explores strategies of age concealment on the part of individuals who are potential victims of ageism, and conversely strategies to politicize aging in collective struggles against ageism. Finally, it examines the extent to which, from the perspective of these struggles, there is a real basis for defining old age as a social and political identity, and old people as a "social group."

## From concealing the stigma of aging to turning it around

Becoming angry when categorized as "old" by younger people who, for example, want to give up their seats on public transport; comparing oneself to specific people in one's cohort who have "aged" more physically or psychologically than oneself; defining oneself as having a lower mental and/or bodily age than one's biological age; and asserting that age "is all in the mind"—these are all common strategies for distinguishing oneself from the age group to which one is assigned by others. [2] But the process of disidentification with one's age group can be taken further, by lying outright about one's age. "*Passing*" refers to the work an individual does in order to mask an assigned status and to acquire the right to live according to another status: [3] passing as white to escape the injustices that one experiences as black; passing as non-Jewish by changing one's surname and concealing one's religious practices to escape anti-Semitic persecution; passing as male in order to gain access to certain activities that are forbidden to women; passing as heterosexual in order to escape homophobia. Use of the term "*passing*" in relation to age concealment is a more recent development. [4] It can refer to the chronological, generational, or bodily dimensions of aging, although these are not always well distinguished in the literature on ageism. [5] In fact, for age as much as for other illegitimate discriminatory criteria, a person can be discriminated against both on the basis of stigma linked to his or her civil status (nationality, surname, place of residence, legal gender, year of birth, etc.) and on the basis of the *perceived* bodily markers of this stigma (skin color, wrinkles, grey hair, perceptible disability, *attitudes or behaviors that* reveal one's regional origin, social origin, gender identity, generation, etc.).

Age *passing* can therefore involve all of these dimensions: individuals may seek to conceal their generational affiliation (i.e., the way in which the era in which they grew up permeates their references, knowledge, or manner of speaking and dressing, which may be considered obsolete and outdated) and clues to their position in the conventional stages of professional, marital, or parental life in order to appear to have been born later and/or to be at an earlier stage of their life. They may also lie about their date of birth or chronological age, a common practice on online dating sites, especially among women over forty, who present themselves as younger in order to increase their chances of being contacted by men their own age, who

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1. I draw here on the neologism "racialization," coined to denote the asymmetrical relations articulated in the perception of hierarchical ethnoracial differences in Colette Guillaumin, *L'idéologie raciste. Genèse et langage actuel* (Paris: Mouton, 1972).
2. See on this point the interview survey conducted by Vincent Caradec, "Être vieux ou ne l'être pas," *L'homme et la société* 147 (2003), 151–67.
3. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 118; Bastien Bosa, Julie Pagis, and Benoît Trépied, eds., "Passing," *Genèses* 114 (special issue) (2019).
4. Kathleen Woodward, "Performing Age, Performing Gender," *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006), 162–89 (185); Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old*, 153; Bouson, *Shame and the Aging Woman*, 1–2, 20–23, 39–44, 95–97.
5. Rennes, "Unpacking Age as a Category."

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tend to prefer younger women.[1] Many actresses do the same in their public biographies in order to increase their chances of being offered roles; in the French Belle Époque, female celebrities frequently concealed their age, during a period when a mass culture that associated female seduction with youth was first emerging.[2] Dutch television star Emile Ratelband's attempt to be identified as twenty years younger on his identity card in 2018, when he was sixty-nine years old, demonstrates that old age can also be perceived as a stigma by male celebrities, even if disqualification on the basis of age occurs later for them and is less focused on appearance.[3] Finally, the physical aspects of aging can be concealed with the use of cosmetic surgery and pharmacological products that aim to mask visible signs of aging. While this form of *passing has been* compared to the use of skin-lightening and hair-relaxing products by those with black skin and afro hair, one of the differences, as noted by researcher Margaret M. Gullette, is that the idea that looking old is negative has become so normalized that advertisers play on it without any need for euphemism. An "anti-aging" revolution is thus said to be necessary in order to "mask" or "defy" one's advancing age—metaphors that would cause outrage if the reference to age were replaced by a reference to ethnoracial appearance.[4]

Whatever its form, *passing* reveals age-dependent inequalities of opportunity and privilege. While in early twenty-first century North America and Europe the purpose of *passing* is almost always to make oneself, as an adult, look younger and not be seen as older, there is nothing universal or transhistorical about this identification of aging as a stigma.[5] It is in order to question and denaturalize such an assumption that some anti-ageist campaigners and groups—for example, in France, members of the Babayagas, Ménopause Rebelle, and Grey Pride—deliberately refer to themselves as "old," rejecting euphemisms designed to avoid this description (such as seniors, older people, elders, or the third age). Here again, the example is provided by other stigmatized groups who have turned around, assumed, and reappropriated the derogatory labels assigned to them on the basis of their gender or sexual orientation (such as faggot, dyke, or slut). From this perspective, according to the American essayist and anti-ageism activist Ashton Applewhite, just as it is homophobia, sexism, and racism that make the lives of gays, women, and black people difficult (not their sexual orientation, skin color, or sexual organs), so it is the ageist structures of society, rather than advancing age, that constitute the main problem we face as we age.[6]

Beyond the reversal of the stigma of old age, old age can also become a broader subversive political identity.[7] Thinkers and activists, sometimes inspired by *queer* theory,[8] argue that

1. Marie Bergström, "L'âge et ses usages sexués sur les sites de rencontres en France," *Clio. Women, Gender, History* 42 (2015), 125-46.
2. Claude Grimmer, "La fin de vie des femmes légères (XVIIIe-début XXe siècle)," in *Vieillir dans le métier*, eds. Christiane Montandon and Jacqueline Trincaz (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007), 216-27.
3. Juliette Rennes, "Âge biologique *vs* âge social: une distinction problématique," *Genèses* 117 (2019), 109-28.
4. Margaret M. Gullette, *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 103-4.
5. Philibert, *L'échelle des âges*, 25, 100; Thomas R. Cole, "'Putting Off the Old': Middle-Class Morality, Antebellum Protestantism, and the Origins of Ageism," in *Old Age in a Bureaucratic Society: The Elderly, the Experts and the State in American History*, eds. David Van Tassel and Peter N. Stearns (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986).
6. Applewhite, *This Chair Rocks*, 232.
7. Catherine Achin and Juliette Rennes, "La vieillesse: une identité politique subversive: entretien avec Thérèse Clerc," *Mouvements* 59 (2009), 133-42.
8. Linn Sandberg and Barbara Marshall, "Queering Aging Futures," *Societies* 7, no. 3 (2017), http:// www.researchgate.net/publication/319415248_Queering_Aging_Futures.

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the fact that, with advancing age, one occupies a marginal position in relation to non-elderly adults, makes it possible to question a whole series of norms in relation to which old age constitutes a form of deviance: the celebration of innovation as an end in itself, which leads to the obsolescence of our experience, know-how, and knowledge as we get older; the injunction to be productive, which leads to the disqualification of the "slowness" of the elderly in a more general context of the accelerated pace of life; [1] the myth of the autonomy of non-elderly adults (*vs. the* "dependent elderly"), which leads to the denial of interdependence at all ages; [2] the identification of "activity" with paid employment, and therefore of retired people as "inactive" even if they carry out free productive work in a community or family context; [3] and finally, the link between female desirability and fertility, which leads to the erotic disqualification of "menopausal women" and the representation of male sexuality as power, in turn producing the specter and fear of "impotence." [4] This approach, which sets out from the question of aging in order to ask broader questions about productivism and performance culture, finds intersections and parallels with the feminist struggles of the twenty-first century which, starting from a radical critique of the norms of virility, have ended up more broadly questioning the denial of vulnerability, the devaluation of both the ethics of care and the caring professions, and capitalist domination over nature and non-humans. [5] The feminist movement, however, conducts this interrogation from the point of view of the constitution of a "political subject" represented as occupying a dominated position in gender relations, whether it be women or gender minorities. The question of the political subject of anti-ageist struggles and the social identity of the victims of ageism, which has been left unresolved until now, appears far more difficult to determine. To what extent does the matrix of gender and race relations, itself forged on the model of class relations, [6] help us to think about age-based asymmetries and the constitution of a political subject of anti-ageist struggles?

## The victims of ageism as a social group

The transposition of the analytical framework of gender and race relations to age relations comes up against three specific features of the latter, well known in social theory work on age. [7] Firstly, while within a given society an individual occupies a relatively stable position in gender, racialization, and class relations (with the exception of the rare trajectories of upward or downward social mobility and gender or race *passing*), they will *necessarily* pass

1. Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010).
2. Lynne Segal, *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing* (London: Verso, 2013).
3. For an analysis of the non-recognition of the free labor of retired people, inspired by the feminist approach to domestic work, see in particular Toni Calasanti, "Theorizing Age Relations," in *The Need for Theory: Critical Approaches to Social Gerontology*, eds. Simon Biggs, Ariela Lowenstein, and Jon Hendricks (Amityville and New York: Baywood, 2003), 202.
4. Linn Sandberg, *Getting Intimate: A Feminist Analysis of Old Age, Masculinity & Sexuality* (Linköping: Linköping University Press, 2011).
5. Caroline Ibos, "Éthiques et politiques du *care*: cartographie d'une catégorie critique," *Clio. Women, Gender, History* 49 (2019), 181-219.
6. Danièle Kergoat, "Comprendre les rapports sociaux," *Raison présente* 178 (2011), 11-21.
7. T. Calasanti, "Theorizing Age Relations," cited in Gosseries, "La singularité d'âge"; Norman Daniels, "Justice between Age Groups: Am I My Parents' Keeper?," *The Milbank Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (1983), 489-522.

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from the position of young adult to that of elderly adult if they are lucky enough not to die young. This fluidity of age affiliation over the course of one's life limits the opportunity to develop an "age consciousness," which is a prerequisite for political identification with a given age, as the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs noted as early as 1938: "How can a collective consciousness emerge in a group that loses all of its members from one year to the next only to acquire entirely new ones?" [1] As for the development of a generational consciousness founded on the common experience of living through the same collective events at the same age, this does not in itself guarantee "age consciousness" since, on the contrary, with people of one's own generation, as anthropologist Marc Augé notes, we do not see ourselves aging: moving together at the same time in the same direction makes us "unconscious of movement." [2]

And age positions do not only change over the course of one's biographical trajectory: even within a given period of the life course, the extent to which one feels old varies according to the situation and age of the people one interacts with. This situational plasticity constitutes the second specific feature of age. A sixty-year-old woman may be demographically categorized as "old" because she is older than the median and mean age of the reference population, while at the same time feeling (and being perceived as) young when she is engaged in an activity that requires a type of skill and know-how that does not diminish with advancing age, or when she is helping her ninety-year-old mother walk down the street. However, the very same day, teenagers may "make her feel old" by placing her in the same age category as her own mother, that of old women (because they are both grandmothers, do not use such and such a technology, etc.). This mobility of age group assignments (and perceived age position) has no equivalent in gender, class and ethnoracial status, which are far more resistant to the diversity of situations and interactions.

The third specific feature of age is that the material dimension of age-related inequalities is far less defining of age relations than it is in the case of class, gender, and racialization. It is true that encountering ageism can result in economic disadvantages such as the impossibility of getting a job, professional promotion, or social benefits, or, when one is very old, being the victim of "financial abuse" by relatives or professionals who steal one's pension, home, or other assets. [3] However, the fact that a person who is discriminated against because they are categorized as old nevertheless generally benefits from resources accumulated during his or her working life, the role of "period effects" and "generation effects" in producing income inequalities between people of different ages, and the existence of intra-familial transfers of capital from ascendants to descendants (and vice versa) make it difficult to define ageism in material terms: some studies describe it instead as "cultural oppression." [4] That is to say, a wealthy eighty-year-old woman may well be privileged in terms of her income compared to a young man, while at the same time being "age-ized," i.e. confronted

1. Maurice Halbwachs, *Morphologie sociale* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1970 [1938]), 107.
2. Marc Augé, *Everybody Dies Young: Time without Age*, trans. Jodie Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press 2016), 19.
3. Alain Koskas, Véronique Desjardin, and Jean-Pierre Médioni, "Maltraitance financière à l'égard des personnes âgées dans les établissements sanitaires, sociaux et médico-sociaux," report for Jean-Paul Delevoye, Ombudsman of the Republic, February 3, 2011.
4. Wagland, *Age, Equality and Cultural Oppression*. See also Glenda Laws, "Understanding Ageism: Lessons from Feminism and Postmodernism," *The Gerontologist* 35, no. 1 (1995), 112–18. Laws draws on philosopher Iris M. Young's work on the cultural dimensions of oppression (see *Justice and the Politics of Difference* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990], especially chap. 2).

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with mockery linked to the markers of her advancing age and generational affiliation, paternalistic behavior linked to her supposed frailties, denial of her aspirations, or various forms of exclusion at social events.

Because of these three major specific features of age, there seems to be little basis for anti-ageist struggles to portray victims of ageism as occupying a position in social relationships analogous to those of gender, class, and racialization. This transposition, often invoked in texts on ageism and age relations, is open to strong objections, as is the identification of old people as a social group in the material sense of the term, an identification that also risks substantializing a life period, to the detriment of longitudinal approaches to social inequalities. [1]

The fluidity of age assignments and positions also makes it difficult to answer the question: who benefits from ageism? Determining the beneficiaries of sexism and/or racism does not seem as problematic since the disadvantages experienced by women, gender minorities, and ethnoracial minorities translate into privileges for those not assigned to these categories. Describing the beneficiaries and victims of ageism, on the other hand, can prove rather perplexing: why do we adopt attitudes of contempt, avoidance, and condescension toward the elderly when we ourselves in turn will eventually be victims of the same? Are we as shortsighted as the characters in Dino Buzzati's short story "The Hunters of Old Men [*Cacciatori di vecchi*]," [2] in which gloating younger generations persecute and hunt down everyone over forty, only to discover, with panic, the signs that they themselves are aging, dooming them in turn to persecution by a new batch of young assailants?

## An intersectional understanding of ageist relations

The literature on ageism often asserts that we all have an interest in a non-ageist society. As Applewhite proclaims in her anti-ageist manifesto: "*People of all ages, unite! We have nothing to lose but our prejudices.*" [3] But can we be so sure that everyone has an interest in creating a non-ageist society? A comparison of anti-ageism and environmentalism may be enlightening: all individuals have an interest in an unpolluted environment for the sake of their own health and well-being and that of future generations, but because of their socioeconomic or professional position or their lifestyle, some have a greater interest than others in the perpetuation of polluting activities. It is in no-one's interest to be treated as inferior because of their age or to be denied access (or for access to become harder), as they become older, to the social goods to which they aspire. But ageism is "profitable," for example, for a whole host of actors in the cosmetics, pharmacological, and medical industries who profit from fear of the signs of bodily aging. Ageism may also seem rational to company managers aiming to save on labor costs, since they can pay young workers less than long-serving employees. More broadly, when it comes to concrete measures for a transition to a non-ageist society—valuing the caring professions more highly, investing in the public health system so as to honor the principle that every individual's life is of equal value regardless of

1. Sarah Irwin, "Later Life, Inequality, and Sociological Theory," *Ageing and Society* 19, no. 6 (1999), 691-715.
2. Dino Buzzati, "Chasseurs de vieux," [1966] in Dino Buzzati, *Le K* (Paris: Pocket, 2004).
3. Applewhite, *This Chair Rocks*, 249. Butler also appropriated Karl Marx's call to the workers in the Communist Manifesto, but he called for a protest grouping of people categorized as old, not "of all ages": "Octogenarians of The World, Unite!" (Butler, "Age-ism," 246).

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age, redeveloping cities on an "*age-friendly*" basis, allowing very elderly adults to remain at home, or creating intergenerational shared housing—opponents of the welfare state, even when they denounce ageism, tend to be hostile to most of these measures, emphasizing the existing burden that "older people" already represent in terms of public spending. [1]

Above all, the perpetuation of an ageist society should be seen in light of the fact that not everyone is an equal victim of ageism. Due to their career path, living conditions, medical care, and diet, members of the dominant classes enjoy a far greater healthy life expectancy and therefore experience the potentially stigmatized signs of old age later in life. [2] In addition, they are less likely to face indirect discrimination based on age, since their economic resources allow them to *choose* the transport, housing, and medical care best suited to their advancing years. Moreover, men of the elite class are more likely than less privileged men, and women from all social backgrounds, to benefit from an honorary status awarded by their former profession (emeritus, honorary president, honorary director, member of the board of directors, advisory boards, academies, etc.): honors that cushion the loss of social status associated with old age. [3] Finally, when they are young, elite men also, as a general rule, encounter fewer obstacles to accessing the privileges associated with the passage to adulthood (educational qualifications, professional status, financial independence, housing, marriage, parenthood, etc.) than those from the working classes, who spend a lengthy period—even more so if they are immigrants or descendants of recent immigrants—stuck in the stage of social youth, synonymous with a lack of status. [4] Adulthood, in this sense, is not simply a legal property of adults, but is the social privilege of those men, and to a lesser extent women, who are not involuntarily seen as young for too long, and who have the social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital necessary to delay their entry into social old age.

Being a relay for ageism, i.e. being in a position to "age" others (by stigmatizing the premature aging of those whose bodies are more worn out because of their social trajectory, or those who seem more impaired because of the ageist view of female aging), is also a sign of other privileges. For example, positions of responsibility in the entertainment industry or in visual culture with the power to decide who appears on stage or in front of a camera are statistically more likely to be occupied by men. Yet it is still widely believed legitimate for men to judge women of their own age as too old for these representative functions, and to prefer younger women. The recruitment of female assistants, secretaries, communications officers, and receptionists by male managers and bosses is commonly carried out according to this criterion of youth, as is their choice of sexual or marital partners, especially in the case of second marriages. [5] (Re-)pairing up with a younger partner may give these men the

1. For a critical analysis of this discourse see Segal, *Out of Time*, chapter 2; Jérôme Pellissier, *La guerre des âges* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007).
2. Nathalie Burnay and Cornelia Hummel, eds., *Vieillissement et classes sociales* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017).
3. Rémi Lenoir, "L'invention du "troisième âge": constitution du champ des agents de gestion de la vieillesse," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 26–27 (1979), 57–82, here 73.
4. Françoise Battagliola, Elizabeth Brown, and Maryse Jaspard, "Itinéraires de passage à l'âge adulte: différences de sexe, différences de classe," *Sociétés contemporaines* 25 (1997), 85–103; Christelle Hamel, Laure Moguérou, and Emmanuelle Santelli, "L'entrée dans la vie adulte des filles et fils d'immigrés," *Politiques sociales et familiales* 105 (2011), 47–58; Stefan Le Courant, "Être le dernier jeune: les temporalités contrariées des migrants irréguliers," *Terrain* 63 (2014), 38–53.
5. Gabrielle Schütz, "Jeunes femmes à tout faire et travail sous-traité: les hôtesses d'accueil," *Agora débats/jeunesses* 81 (2019), 93–107; Marie Bergström, "De quoi l'écart d'âge est-il le nombre? L'apport des *big data* à l'étude de la différence d'âge au sein des couples," *Revue française de sociologie* 59, no. 3 (2018), 395–422.

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feeling of postponing the aging process they perceive in others of their age group. As they advance into old age, their "loss of autonomy" is also potentially mitigated by the unpaid *care* work of their younger partner. On the other hand, women from all social backgrounds, and working-class men, especially those with an immigrant background, are more likely to be cared for by professionals and institutions for the elderly, meaning that the loss of their capacities plays more of a part in defining their social status. [1] This situation exposes them more to ageist interactions, which are more likely to occur in professional *care* work than in a marital care relationship.

These inequalities in aging do not mean that men of the elite class do not face various forms of ageist communication and practices from younger people as they age, or that they do not experience as a hardship the way in which advancing age distances them from dominant norms of masculinity that are antagonistic to the experience of vulnerability. [2] It is therefore true, in a sense, that everyone has an interest in bringing about a non-ageist society; but not everyone has an *equal* interest. Being in a privileged gender and class position delays and mitigates the social inferiorization associated with growing older, and also means that one will potentially be a perpetrator of ageist practices for a longer period than one is a victim of them.

## Conclusion

Over the past forty years, research has documented various forms of age discrimination and stigmatization of aging. By valuing the experience of equality between people of different ages, and not just the principle of the successive equality of these people throughout their lives, anti-ageists have denaturalized various forms of hierarchical categorization based on age. Borrowing from work on sexism and racism has been of heuristic value in analyzing these forms of categorization, demonstrating the illegitimacy of excluding persons deemed too old to access a range of social goods, and understanding the strategies used by aging adults to conceal or politicize their advancing age.

On the other hand, it hardly seems appropriate to transpose the materialist framework for analyzing class, gender, and race relations to age relations. The mobility of the position one occupies in age relations over the course of one's life and depending on one's situation, the gradual nature of advancing age, and the plasticity of the boundaries between youth and old age all limit the emergence of an "age consciousness." Finally, the difficulty of establishing a systemic correlation between the stigma of old age and economic disadvantage makes it difficult to characterize ageism as a "social relationship" in a materialist sense. However, the more an individual occupies a dominated position in social relationships, the more likely they are to be *age-ized*: working class men, even more so if they are immigrants or of recent immigrant origin, and women in general, have less access than men from privileged backgrounds to the social status of adulthood, and tend to be considered old before them.

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1. Hélène Thomas, "Le 'métier' de vieillard: institutionnalisation de la dépendance et processus de désindividualisation dans la grande vieillesse," *Politix* 72 (2005), 33-55; Mohamed Madoui and Marcel Jaeger, eds., "Le 3e âge des migrants," *Hommes et migrations* 1309, special issue (2015), https://journals.openedition.org/hommesmigrations/3056.
2. Robert Meadows and Kate Davidson, "Maintaining Manliness in Later Life," in *Age Matters: Re-Aligning Feminist Thinking*, eds. Toni M. Calasanti and Kathleen F. Slevin (New York: Routledge, 2006), 295-312; Segal, *Out of Time*, chapter 3; Sandberg, *Getting Intimate*.

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In other words, occupation of a privileged social position makes it possible to escape ageism for longer, and in this sense age constitutes a "useful category" for analyzing gender, class, and racialization relations. [1] However, anti-ageism cannot be reduced to a component of struggles against inequalities based on gender and social position: by questioning the injunction to innovate and the acceleration of the pace of life, as well as the division and hierarchy of the phases of life with the non-elderly, supposedly autonomous, efficient, productive, and reproductive adult at the top of the pyramid, ageism research has opened up a specific field of reflection and action. Of course, this field can hardly be based on a self-described group of "we, the old"—an identity that is as shifting as it is difficult to assume. But here there may still be lessons to be learned from feminism. The subject of feminism—"we women"—has gradually emancipated itself from assigned gender identities to include a variety of identifications not limited to the category "women." [2] This shift could well set a precedent for thinking about an anti-ageist coalition that might transcend generational and age boundaries, while at the same time occupying a position in political debates (on the social role of the state, the organization of work, or feminist issues). From this perspective, our individual difficulties in identifying with stabilized age categories could become a positive resource for constitution of the political subject of the struggle against ageism.

**By Juliette Rennes**

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1. Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986), 1053–75.
2. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), especially chapters 1 and 2.