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RAWLSIAN JUSTICE FOR AGEING SOCIETIES¹

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Abstract

The paper presents the population ageing phenomenon in the EU-28 (I) and highlights some of the social problems associated to it (II). It analyzes how the Rawlsian theory of justice can approach the impact of societal ageing (III) by focusing on two concepts: the idea of self-respect as an essential primary good to be fairly distributed and the Aristotelian principle of motivation, which links rational life plans to the exercise of complex and meaningful capacities. It exemplifies some open practical guidelines as to what kind of political actions may be necessary for a society to guarantee the social bases of self-respect and be considered fair and it concludes (IV) by showing that Rawls's structural view can be useful.

Keywords: Ageism; Aristotelian principle; Basic structure of society; John Rawls; Population ageing; Self-respect.

1. The population ageing phenomenon in the EU-28

We live in societies reshaped by a process of progressive ageing, with people living longer than ever before. The elderly population, especially in high-income nations, has been growing fast for decades, whereas the share of those of working-age has been declining. According to Eurostat (2019), the trend of societal ageing is clear in the EU-28. If in 2008 the share of the population over 65 reached 17.1 %, in 2018, just ten years

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later, there was an increase of 2.6 percentage points, reaching 19.7 % of the total population. The share of people aged 65 years and over has increased in every single European State.

These are high figures, especially when compared to the share of those of working age (15 to 64 years old), which amounts to 64.7 % of the population of the 28 member countries of the EU in 2018; most of them 'baby boomers' born between 1946 and 1965, whose retirement date has either already arrived or is getting closer. The figures show that in 2018 there were slightly more than three persons (3.28) of working age for every person aged 65 or over, which is an old-age dependency ratio of 30.5%. This indicator, which expresses the ratio between the economically inactive and active per 100 persons of working age, is even higher in countries such as Italy (35.2 %) Finland (34.2 %) and Greece (34.1 %), with less than three working age people for every person aged 65 or over.

The median age in the EU-28 has also increased by 2.7 years from 2008 to 2018, rising from 40.4 to 43.1 years, which means that half of the population in the 28 member countries of the EU is at present over 43.

Population projections confirm the strength of the trend: the EU-28's population will continue to age until 2100 and the older population will become even older. The share of persons aged 80 years or above will increase by two and a half times between 2018 (5.6 %) and 2100 (14.6 %) (Eurostat 2019). Worldwide population projections estimate that by 2050 the world population aged 80 years and above will reach 434 million, which confirms that population ageing is a worldwide occurrence (United Nations 2015). In the EU-28's population, the share of persons aged 65 years or over is projected to rise from 19.8 % in 2018 to 31.3 % by 2100. The old-age dependency ratio will double from 30.5 % (2018) to 57.3 % (2100) and the median age is expected to rise from 43.3 years in 2018 to 48.7 years in 2100 (Eurostat 2019).

In accordance with this growing trend, it is foreseeable that the social relevance of older adults will also grow in contemporary and future societies.

The causes of this new demographic reality can be found in the increase in life expectancies over the centuries due to improvements in housing, technology, public health care, nutrition and wealth that have added almost thirty years to the average life span (Macionis 2014, 431).

Hand in hand with this has been the decrease in birth rates over many years, caused by advances in medicine, birth control measures, the decline in infant mortality and the fact that children are a major expense in industrialized countries, which combined with an increased emphasis on careers, results in fewer births.

Finally, the expanded lifespan can rightfully be interpreted as a substantial social success but it also faces societies with the challenge of revising the adequacy of their social model regarding the autonomy of older adults and the role they can play in society.

2. Ageing and ageism

Ageing is not just a gradual biological process of somatic changes, it is also a matter of culture, a social construct made up of roles, values, ideas, expectations and prejudices that every society attaches to their older members.

The social world is composed of objective structures with enormous guidance influx and power that constitute the foundations of subjective representations. These structures exert structural coercion on agency and are largely independent of the conscience and will of agents (Bourdieu 1990, 125-126). The social representation of old age, as a shared conceptual framework, is part of these mental structures which shape society.

Ageing, understood as a normative unidirectional category establishing what is considered “normal ageing”, is a vague concept that can never apprehend the heterogeneity of those who are included. As a socio-demographic item, it can be helpful providing we do not forget there can be substantial differences within the classification. Analysts distinguish at least two groups: the younger elderly (third age), between sixty-five and seventy-five, and the older elderly, (fourth age), over seventy-five. These two cohorts are appreciably diverse: the former usually enjoy much better health, often have financial stability and live independently whereas the latter, mostly women, are more dependent and less autonomous (Macionis 2014, 428). But even these subcategories are internally diverse; there some other relevant factors such as

ethnicity, marital status, level of education, economic situation, etc. which break with the alleged homogeneity of the concept. The elders are women and men of all classes, wealth and ethnic backgrounds. The idea of “normal ageing” which presents a natural way to age is questionable. Generalizations about an entire category of people are inaccurate. Social prescriptions which try to lock so many diverse old people in such a narrow stereotype are certainly unfair. It is true that the elderly as a whole face special challenges as they age but not all of them are exposed to the same risks or have the same needs.

In any case, age has traditionally been one of the criteria every society has taken for the distribution of social goods among their members: power, rights, wealth or privileges. The gerontocracies of agrarian societies honored maturity and reserved the leadership, power and most privileges for the elders, who remained active members of their societies until they died.

Similarly, our contemporary Western societies maintain an age-based hierarchy but in contrast to those cultures, ours give little power and prestige to the elderly. We live in youth-oriented cultures in which the biological changes that happen after certain ages are not well received or considered. Our cultures foster a desire for the novelty, the modern, the new and eternal youth, which are identified with happiness. That explains why so many individuals do not come to terms with ageing and refuse to accept the reality by trying to keep by all means young and fit until the end.

It is interesting to note that *ealdorlic* meant chief, princely, excellent or authentic in Old English whereas today, *elderly* connotes frailty. With this background, the older tend to be defined in negative stereotypical ways, as people going “down the hill” whose main attribute is the progressive loss of something: less health, less physical power, poorer cognitive functioning, less competence, less memory, less height and weight, less vitality, less activity, less sharpness of the senses, less sensorimotor coordination, less hair, lower income, less independence and less autonomy. In a youth-oriented culture where beauty and wealth are primary values, ageing is socially perceived as the loss of all that is desirable.

In these representations of old age, there can be observed an emphasis on the pathological over the normal that does not derive from the very reality of the elders but from the ideological association between old age and decadence (Rodríguez 1998). According to this narrative, old age is a gloomy incurable disease marked by deprivation and decline.

Prejudice and lack of knowledge blur and distort the objective image of the elders and replace it with stereotypes which misrepresent and discriminate them in subtle or blatant ways. They are categorized as useless, irritable, unhappy, lonely, poor, senile, sick, unable to learn, unattractive, and unable to work effectively (Lytle and Levy 2017).

Language is a useful indicator of ageism: pejorative language toward the elders, paternalistic attitudes, derogatory remarks or infantilization are more widespread than what it is commonly thought. Ageism is deeply rooted in the basic structure of our culture, it is institutionalized. Many of these negative images of ageing are ubiquitous and shared by different generations within the same culture.

There is also a benevolently-provided type of ageism, apparently harmless, especially widespread. People try to adapt their speech and actions to the stereotypical condition of older adults. When talking to them, some well-meaning people usually employ a louder volume, higher pitch, a slow speech rate, exaggerated intonations and simplified vocabulary which is detrimental (Hummert, Wiemann, and Nussbaum 1994, 168). Something similar happens when people compassionately provide physical assistance to older adults who do not need it. In both cases, in speech or actions, people are conveying the idea of the elder's incompetence, which can be perceived by them as disrespectful and patronizing (Ryan, Bourhis and Knops 1991).

Besides, the targets of this social pressure do not often protest and tend to resign, or even internalize and accept these models. In any case, the absence of "outraged victims" makes ageism pass unnoticed and is one of the keys that contribute to its perpetuation (Nelson 2009).

These negative values are closely linked to the economic organization of society, which is a relevant segment of the basic structure of society. Professional activity is a key factor in our industrial-capitalist societies. Work transcends the economic sphere to become an

important part of personal identity and a source of purpose, status, wealth, social position, prestige and influence.

In a fast-changing economy in which constant change is the key, past experience owned by the elders is no longer a valuable asset: removed from positions of responsibility, most posts and offices are occupied by middle-aged people with a younger image, more current knowledge and updated skills. After all, experience and knowledge can be stored and found online at any time.

The logic of productivity has become one of the most important values both in economy and society and the social position is to a large extent determined by the place occupied in the productive process. In consequence, those who play nonproductive roles are devalued and marginalized in a socially tolerated form of discrimination.

And this process of devaluation happens overnight: leaving the workforce means the sudden loss of the role and social status of the worker, even for those for whom the work was not a source of status or satisfaction. There are no demanding obligations or social expectations for the retired, but there is no recognition either.

They have lost the traditional leading or counselling role in families and they are simply displaced on the margins of society, discredited without a social role to fulfill. Later life gets additionally hard when for many, retirement also means a significant decline in income, as retirement pensions are lower than salaries.

Besides social roles, status and income, social lives also suffer a loss, sometimes due to the lack of contact with co-workers and in other cases due to the death of spouses or friends. The difficulty of creating new meaningful personal roles to replace the social ones left behind, leads some to withdraw from social relationships and passively disengage. The result is often progressive social isolation; some elders get disengaged from their daily routines and lose interest in any type of activity; many spend the hours alone passively sitting in front of the TV. Social isolation begins to be a major problem in our western societies and it is receiving growing attention within gerontology. Evidence shows that the low quantity or quality of social relationships is a risk factor for the development of serious illnesses (Valtorta *et al.* 2016), behavioral health problems (Choi, Irwin and Cho 2015), and even

increased risk of death (House, Landis and Umberson 1988), (Elovainio *et al.* 2017). Similarly, older adults exposed to negative stereotypes of ageing (be it hostile or benevolent) have health-related problems and live shorter lives (Lamont, Swift and Abrams 2015).

The questions we are discussing transcend individual impact and can be considered, not as a problem calling for psychological interventions but as a political issue with a significant impact on public health (Marshall 2015).

3. The Rawlsian approach

We will approach these issues from the Rawlsian framework by focusing on some of the main concepts present in Rawls's justice as fairness: the basic structure of society, primary goods, the idea of self-respect and the Aristotelian principle of motivation.³

John Rawls coined the term "basic structure of society" to refer to the institutional background in which individuals and associations can cooperate with one another. It is a society's main institutions and the way in which they fit and work together into a unified scheme of social cooperation over time. These major political and social institutions include the constitution, the legal and political systems, the legally recognized forms of property, the organization of the economy, the family, etc. (Rawls 1993, 11: 1999, § 2)

The basic structure, which Rawls considers the primary subject of justice, is the core of social justice because it has the power to define what is desirable, what deserves merit or what conducts and character traits are valued. This whole dynamic structure shapes individuals and affects their well-being in areas which depend largely on public policies: health care, dependency, financial security and opportunities to actively engage in their societies. The basic structure of society is to assure that

³ We will consider the claims of justice between age groups within a society, leaving aside in this paper the issue of justice for future generations.

everyone can adequately develop and exercise fully their moral powers over the course of a complete life (Rawls 2001, 200).

Following Rawls, we understand social justice as a set of principles which do not directly apply to individuals' particular behavior, actions, transactions or interpersonal relations but to the institutional structure. The basic principles of social justice do not focus on any particular part isolated from the rest of the basic structure (Mandle and Reidy 2014, 55-58).

From this structural approach, we will focus on how the whole basic structure can adapt to the changes and risks of this demographic scenario and provide a general context to facilitate successful ageing, that is, to ensure the elder the possibility to enjoy a normal quality of life in the emotional, physical, material and social domains (Goldman *et al.* 2018).

One of the functions of the basic structure is to employ criteria for the distribution of social primary social goods among the members of a community. The conceptions of the good are plural, but regardless of how everyone understands and defines them, in order to pursue an idea of the good, or a plan of life, every individual has to combine their natural assets and the social resources that society makes available to them.

However, distinguishing clearly between "natural primary goods" such as health, intelligence and imagination and social primary goods is controversial: there are no natural goods in the abstract as they cannot be detached from the social conditions in which they are exercised. Health can be understood as a natural good, but without healthcare: medicines, treatments or surgery it would be a fragile good. The same applies to intelligence as a natural capacity and its development in an educational system. Similarly, the autonomy of some older adults depends on the existence of a dependency aid system and their social participation depends on the presence of participatory mechanisms.

Social primary goods can enhance natural goods or provide means to replace their absence. They can be considered all-purpose goods that individuals are presumed to want regardless of whatever else they want.

In order to apprehend social pluralism, the list of social primary goods has to be an unfinished sketch, suitable regardless of who the recipients are, the conditions in which they are or how they want to live life. Social primary goods need to be useful whether people are young or old, and both if their vital options lead them to retired life or social

involvement, the cultivation of the spiritual or sensory enjoyment. Social primary goods are desirable on the basis of a thin theory of the good because they create an environment of equal rights and freedoms in which anyone can make their choice with equal opportunities to pursue their goals without external impositions or restrictions.

Besides, primary social goods need to cover, to avoid falling into excessive idealism, certain material means to undertake their projects and live as they see fit. Without a framework of wealth and equitable opportunities, some individuals may be weighed down by circumstances beyond their control.

The value of the Rawlsian approach is to ensure that these valuable social primary goods are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution is to everyone's advantage (Rawls 1999a, 54).

In consequence, providing that the basic structure can guarantee this fair distribution, individuals can say that there is a background of justice that allows everyone to seek happiness in their own way. This lies at the core of political liberalism, creating an environment in which individuals develop as they see fit.

Rawls claims that perhaps the most important primary good to be fairly distributed is linked to self-respect (Rawls 1999b, 158). Self-respect is a feeling of pride, an attitude of confidence in oneself related to values such as honor and dignity. The basic structure of society cannot assure that all citizens acquire and maintain this subjective feeling but it can provide the structural resources that contribute to support it. In order to stress the objective character of primary goods, Rawls specifies that the primary good is not self-respect as an attitude toward oneself but the social bases of self-respect (Rawls 2001, 60).

The social bases of self-respect demand all that is essential from basic institutions so that individuals can have a "lively sense of their own worth as moral persons" (Rawls 1980). Institutions can help develop "a confident conviction of the sense of one's own value" (Rawls 1999b, 158) because our sense of our own worth in some ways "depends upon the respect shown to us by others" and the social role occupied (Rawls 1999b, 171).

When individuals are fairly treated by institutions and receive the consideration of fellow citizens, they have bases to believe they are

valuable. This is especially so, when individuals are more vulnerable, as in the case of older adults. In negative terms, “no one can long possess an assurance of his own value in the face of the enduring contempt or even the indifference of others” (171). Ageism, as a perspective on the social and moral worth of persons which results in systematic discrimination on the basis of age, can be a serious threat to self-respect. Therefore, it ought to be conceived, not as an issue of cultural concern, but as a matter of basic justice.

The social bases of self-respect can be analyzed distinguishing two closely linked aspects. The first aspect of self-respect is a firm assurance that what one does or plans to do is worth carrying out. When self-respect is lacking, people feel their plans of life are not worth pursuing, they lack the will to strive for their ends, “all desire and activity becomes empty and vain,” and they may “sink into apathy and cynicism” (Rawls 1999a, 386). This aspect of self-respect can certainly be supported by social institutions: unequal treatment of groups of people, lack of medical care or large inequalities in material aspects can undermine it. The basic structure plays the role to guarantee that all reasonable plans of life can be fulfilled in similar terms.

The value of one’s plans is in turn related to the Aristotelian principle. Rawls assumes, following Aristotle⁴, that people tend to prefer comprehensive long-term plans when they involve the exercise of a more complex combination of innate or trained abilities. People usually enjoy exercising their faculties and the enjoyment grows “the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity” (Rawls 1999a, 364). Activities which bring into play developed refined talents with subtle and intricate discriminations seem to be a source of higher value, whereas simpler activities which used to be enjoyable in the past end up looking boring and flat (Rawls 1999a, 414). The Aristotelian principle appears to be a basic principle of human motivation.

The reason why complex activities are more enjoyable is because they satisfy the almost general desire for variety and surprise. They also allow the possibility of personal expression and individual style, leave

⁴ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. VII, chs. 11-14, and bk. X, chs. 1-5.

room for ingenuity and invention and let people increase their capacities over time. It is true that training capacities and learning how to exercise them can be hard at first but as soon as people have acquired the mastery, the pleasant experience of reward starts to compensate for the rigors of the training. Human pleasure and enjoyment seem to arise from achievements in different domains: cognitive, moral, aesthetic, etc. The mastery of these activities, which can be achieved in old age, is not only enjoyable for the practitioner but is also likely to please others, who also enjoy with the display of others' excellences. This can prove the social interdependency of rational plans of life; the flourishing of individuals, which can include activities such as personal affections, friendship, meaningful work, social cooperation, the pursuit of knowledge or the fashioning and contemplation of beautiful objects can be perfectly complementary with the improvement of others (Rawls 1999a, 425). An attractive plan of life that satisfies the Aristotelian principle supports self-respect because it increases the feeling of competence and the sense that life is worth living, especially when there are people around who can appreciate or admire the activities performed.

The Aristotelian principle does not require particularly gifted individuals or any kind of perfectionist standard, there is no level of expertise to be reached: the logic of efficiency does not apply here. What is relevant is the feeling that one can pursue a life plan in depth and join others who share similar plans in communities or associations where to take pleasure in their mutual realization.

In consequence, people can value their plans when they perceive they will allow them to fully realize their natural assets and learned abilities and keep them growing regardless their age or physical conditions. Self-realization is a process with no end date.

We have mentioned the importance of the sense of one's own value and the value of rational plans as bases for self-respect. The second aspect we would like to mention is related to the confidence needed to believe that one has the ability to pursue one's plan of life successfully. This has to do with the perception that there are enough opportunities, means and social cohesion to pursue a plan of life. The presence of associative ties, which some disengaged elders lack, strengthens this aspect of self-respect by providing a supportive setting

which diminishes the likelihood of failure in case of self-doubt (Rawls 1999a, 386-7).

To believe it is not beyond one's power to fulfill one's intentions is not only necessary from the individual perspective; it is also part of the common good as it helps people defend not only their own conceptions of the good, but also care about their liberties and opportunities and develop their sense of justice (Rawls 1980). This is largely close to one of the roles of political philosophy, namely, reconciliation. Rawls is right when he states, following Hegel, that it is possible to calm frustration and rage against society and its history if the basic structure of society is perceived not as something people can only resign themselves but as something they can rationally aspire to, that is, when people perceive they live under a "fair system of cooperation over time from one generation to the next", where participants view themselves as free and equal over a complete lifetime (Rawls 2001, 3-4).

There would be no frustration if everyone understood the terms of social cooperation have been stipulated in such a way that everyone is willing to assume them or, at least, that no one can legitimately make reasonable claims that call into question the legitimacy of the basic structure.

Once persuaded that one's self-respect normally depends upon the respect of others, it is clearly rational for political entities to secure the social and institutional bases of self-respect so that all the fellow associates have the conviction they are considered valuable over a complete life.

People need not be particularly interested in each other's interests but everyone needs to receive the esteem of their associates and in turn show consideration to the other's feelings and aspirations. This does not mean society can be understood as a community united in affirming the same doctrine, it only means that a free independent and pluralistic society, no matter how profoundly diverse it is, cannot afford indifference or contempt toward any group of people such as the elders.

A society is fair and stable when it creates a setting suitable for mutual respect and everyone benefits when this duty is honored (Rawls 1999a, 297). The costs are negligible when compared to the benefits.

Rawls repeatedly insists that his theory of justice gives more support to self-respect than to any other primary good. It is both one of

the basic common ends in all diverse conceptions of the good and it is also the most important political mean to avoid cynicism and frustration against society (Rawls 1999a, 348).

We can conclude by saying that basic structure plays a basic role to express equal respect for all citizens by treating them in the final stages of life in ways that they can consider justified, as equal citizens with equal liberties, goods and social recognition. Additionally, it is possible to claim, going beyond Rawls, that the basic structure also needs to address the social conditions that undermine the social bases of self-respect regarding the elders.

Far from being impartial or neutral, it would be part of the aims of the basic structure to assure the institutional bases of self-respect also permeate background cultures, families, social groups, people's attitudes of mind and the choices they make within that structure. It is necessary to foster an ethos free of ageism or any other kind of discrimination, which is a blow to self-respect. It is essential to commit to socially implementing the norm of self-respect that the institutions are already committed to (Cohen 2009). This is close to the idea of civic friendship: the common goal of fostering the equality of social esteem and eradicate any signs of subordination or exclusion.

We find the Aristotelian Principle useful in helping to define public policies concerning the elderly. As a principle of motivation, the principle simply asserts the propensity of humans to be driven by the desire to exercise their faculties; it is not a constant pattern of choice; like most tendencies, it may be overridden by psychological, social or political forces. But this is precisely it: once we are persuaded that a) people prefer complex to simpler activities, b) the exercise of these complex activities is linked to the esteem of others and therefore to self-respect and c) that the activities people find more attractive depend not only on their natural talents but on the circumstances that surround them such as opportunities, associations and groups of people likely to encourage them, it may be sensible to implement political mechanisms to allow for activities and participation in social or recreational activities, classes, social clubs, sports clubs, political parties, voluntary activities... in which a complex repertoire of realized capacities could be put into practice. This would not be too hard to achieve, as most human activities

such as art, knowledge, sports or even pastimes are open to develop intricacies and subtleties almost endlessly (Rawls 1999a, 376-377).

The Aristotelian principle might not apply to some persons, as a general conception it cannot be true for all⁵. But even if this principle is not universal, it provides political guidelines that can contribute to establishing a social environment with complex and simple vital horizons to pursue freely. A wide repertoire of vital universes to choose from or to compose one's identity with can release older adults from the stereotyped subjectivities produced by the labor market and walk different avenues of personal development that could not be explored previously due to the lack of time or opportunities. It would be a way to give back older adults what society took from them: the possibility of fluctuating between different ways of being and redefining their social role free from the parameters of efficiency, production and calculation so widespread in our societies.

To name but one example of how to translate these practices into public policies and offer opportunities in a life stage where there tend to be few, we could refer to intergenerational programs in primary schools. These intergenerational activities, which can be part of planned lessons in Primary School, involve organized interactions between older adults and school children. Activities can include reading to young children, talking about professions, taking part in artistic activities, storytelling or sharing games (Ross 2018). This allows the elders an enjoyable opportunity for social interaction avoiding the risk of social isolation and loneliness. Simultaneously, they can exercise and preserve cognitive and physical functions and also gain a sense of meaningfulness and purpose which undoubtedly promotes their wellbeing (Gonzales, Matz-Costa & Morrow-Howell 2015). Intergenerational programs can be considered as a source of self-respect and health for elders (Murayama *et al.* 2015).

These programs are also designed for the benefit of the younger generations, who are educated on ageing and can acquire a more positive and realistic view of the elderly and their needs. Let us take into

⁵ Rawls admits that however extravagant it might seem, the idea of devoting most time and energy to "counting blades of grass" is not irrational, as long as it is the result of a free, fully informed decision (Rawls 1999a, 379-380).

account that the visibility of the elderly in the mass media is scarce. The inclusion in leading roles of participants over sixty on television and radio or in movies is uncommon and in plenty of cases their public image is often focused on their limitations and decline. The lack of presence in the public arena makes early-childhood education on ageing that much more vital. These programs can help the emotional development of children, broaden their social perspectives, generate a different concept of ageing and affect their health and well-being throughout life (Garcia *et al.* 2016). An active old age can be instilled in the early stages of age. Intergenerational social programs, when properly planned, organized and monitored by all the members of the education and healthcare community, can successfully promote awareness and understanding between generations, and are a powerful tool to eradicate prejudices based on mutual ignorance (Giraudeau and Bailly 2019).

The benefits can also reach the whole community: these initiatives normalize contact between generations and create links and mutual understanding that strengthen social cohesion and civic engagement.

There are plenty of other initiatives that can also help provide the social bases of self-respect, such as opportunities for lifelong learning opportunities and individual development, volunteering activities aimed at seniors, the participation of elders in areas often reserved to the young, university programs directed at the inclusion of seniors in formal education, intergenerational co-residence programs directed at university students who share a residence with an older adult, etc. All these measures can widen the chances of self-realization and well-being throughout the life period and have long-term impacts on the social perception of older people.

In the design of these policies, each society should grant a central role to its protagonists by consulting them in the matters which most affect them. That participative movement would have a multifold functionality: it would help to show that the institutions and their values are the outcome of collective endeavor in which the elders are still considered full active members of their society and taken into consideration (Rodríguez 1998).

A just society is one which preserves the democratic social cooperation on a footing of mutual respect and equality irrespective of

their age, social class or economic conditions (Rawls 2001, 28). That would engage the seniors in meaningful processes of community engagement and on the other hand, society would make use of the knowledge and experiences of those who are to be the main recipients, which would guarantee the success of the policies.

4. Conclusions

Social actions and interactions move under the weight of the objective structures that shape a society. When societies define situations as real, they become real in their consequences. However, we claim, following Bourdieu, that it is not advisable to underestimate the potential for change of actions. The possibility of the dialectical transformation of these reality-generating structures is not closed (Bourdieu 1990, 26). This means that each society has the challenge of building meaning and attributing values to old age. Being aware of this fact can help us consider that structures or values are not immutable, those who built them can also contribute to changing them.

This value change is necessary to reshape the basic structure so that the elders remain considered as full citizens and as autonomous people.

But as we have said, they are not a homogeneous collective, and from this we can draw two conclusions: on the one hand, that we cannot formulate normative models on how old age should be lived and on the other hand, favorable structural conditions are required so that everyone can live old age as they wish. Structural conditions are both the fight against age-based stereotypes and equalizing opportunities for health, participation and security (WHO 2002). Age is a booster of inequalities: inequalities between groups become greater in old age (Barber 2017). Inequalities in health, for example, are related not only to genetics but also to the family people are born into, wealth, ethnicity and the cumulative impact of inequities throughout life (WHO 2015).

The advantaged have more opportunities over the course of their lifespan to gather resources such as education, power, wages and wealth and are less exposed to inequities or age-based forms of stereotype threat (Barber 2017). In consequence, an equal distribution of opportunities

would require focusing on the least advantaged groups within this heterogeneous group; that is one of the useful Rawlsian notions. It is not easy to define who are the least disadvantaged, but we can consider, following Rawls, that we can include in this category those negatively affected by three main types of contingencies: a) family and class origins, b) natural endowments and c) fortune and luck. Rawls is aware that these three categories do not cover the whole spectrum of causes and adds that “various refinements are no doubt necessary” (Rawls 1999b, 259). The point is that this approach shows the link with the problem of contingency and reveals that some people do not have access to social primary goods for reasons that escape their control, and that is something that calls for redress. Those who have lost their natural endowments with age, who have less autonomy and capabilities to live without help, who run the highest risk of being excluded, who are most subject to prejudice and whose social bases of self-respect are weak should certainly be included in this category. In consequence, following this Rawlsian approach we can conclude by saying that public policy must be crafted to reduce inequities and find ways to help disadvantaged older adults regain independence and autonomy.

We live in an appropriate context for interdisciplinary cooperation to address the social treatment of ageing from different perspectives. It is reasonable and timely to gather the collaboration of gerontologists, age studies experts, public health specialists and scholars from humanities to help redefine what it means to age and what societies can do to cope with societal ageing, for the sake of the elders and society as a whole (Marshall 2015). Once the goal of increasing life expectancy has been achieved, it remains to establish the improvement in the quality of the last years of life as a new collective goal.

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