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How many people are there in the third age?

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ABSTRACT
With reference to the concept of 'the stages of life' rather than 'ages', this paper examines the possibilities of estimating population figures for the First, Second and Third Ages in the United Kingdom, both for the present and at points in the past. The approach utilises the economic status of the citizenry – in particular, before, during and after paid work – rather than their ages or birth dates. The quantitative approximations are accompanied by a social commentary about the leverage of economic pressures, especially the calls or otherwise of employment, in effect, the Second Age, on the relative size of the First and Third Ages. It is concluded that much may be gained from 'redrawing the composition of the population with social rather than demographic contours'.

KEY WORDS – historical demography, age structure, third age, United Kingdom.

Introduction

How many people are there in the Third Age? Just before his much-mourned death in 2000, Peter Laslett asked me to provide him with this figure, which I was able to do in time for him to appraise personally, albeit too late for the next work he was planning. On a personal note, I had encountered Peter Laslett, already, of course, known to me as a master of 17th century political thought and early modern social history, during the late 1960s, soon after I became a cog in Michael Young's spinning wheel. We were involved in a number of Youngian ventures and it was while I was working for him, when he was founder-chairman of the *National Consumer Council*, that Peter Laslett sat in my office and declared unequivocally that I should put behind me my outmoded career with children and youth. He commanded me to turn to the real issue of the late 20th century, older age. Suitably chastened, I cast about and sought appointment as the Director of the *Centre for Policy on Ageing* (CPA). I took up the post in September 1980, just after CPA had been transformed from being the *National Corporation for the Care of Old People*. This was subsequent to its

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changing its function more basically to that of a think-tank on the social issues of older age. I arrived at about the time this meritorious journal was launched. Now as Chairman of CPA, I am delighted to wish it much happiness as it celebrates its silver jubilee and to offer this tiny birthday gift, the answer I prepared for Peter Laslett's conundrum – which, in itself, is a critique of the official use of birthdays.

Banning birthdays

One of the curios of ageism in British society is that its antagonists are almost entirely of the school of anti-old-age discrimination. They berate, rightly, a society that accepts oldness as a synonym for illness, for decline and for senescence; they are less conscious of the hurdles of ageism throughout the whole of life. Moreover, there is a tendency to assail the disadvantageous aspects, such as low state pensions, as opposed to advantageous ones, such as free or discounted travel, which are, of course, equally ageist. When, in the 1980s, CPA campaigned against the then 65 years bar on jury service, on the grounds that it contributed to older people being 'second class citizens', those involved were attacked by many older people, who did not wish to do jury service, but themselves the first to complain that they were reduced to being 'second class citizens' by the paucity of their pension income. That old-fashioned phrase 'rights and responsibilities' sprang to mind.

Beyond that, the deployment of birthdays throughout the lifespan is the fundamental question and there is some intellectual weakness in a case that is solely directed towards the older echelons of the national community. If it is arbitrary and discriminatory to declare a person unfit for work at 60 or 65 years of age, then it is equally arbitrary and discriminatory to declare them fit for school at five, or to vote at 18, or to drive a car at 17, and so on. Speaking to the *British Association for the Advancement of Science* in 1990, Michael Young made the point with some lucidity:

> People's birthdays are no longer just private affairs: they are public events which they have to repeatedly declare in public to show they are entitled to go to school, to have sexual intercourse, to buy alcohol, to marry, to vote and much else besides. … For since 1836 age has steadily increased its hold on our behaviour and become so deeply embedded in custom and law that people are hardly aware of what has happened. It is as though the great game of age-stratification is being played in a dark room. … Yet I am sure that the whole edifice of age-identification is getting increasingly shaky, in good part because social ageing – that is, the roles which society cast us into at different ages – is getting more and more out of step with biological ageing. … A more radical approach would be to do away with age altogether as the governing criterion for marking

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the transition from one phase of life to another. People's ages would then be something very personal, a private matter. This would require bringing age within the scope of an extended *Data Protection Act*. Age would become information people should not be required to give to the state or to anyone. It would become as illegal to rule out a person from a job solely on account of age as it is already to do so on the grounds of gender or ethnic origin.[1]

Some years ago the advisory council of a prestigious quango met to discuss the draft application form for the post of its director. The form began with a list of immunities, ranging from gender and sexual orientation to disability and criminal conviction. These were all properly taboo and of the 12, one was 'age'. The second question, after 'full name', was 'date of birth'. Diffident hands were raised. Was a ban on age discrimination compatible with such a question? The usual bureaucratic excuses were trotted out, along the lines that this was necessary for pensions eligibility, and after a short, lively debate, 'age' was erased from the list. It was apparent that the appointing panel felt obliged to take chronological age into consideration, that is, to discriminate by that yardstick.

The 1836 *Act for the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages*, whatever its benefits, has led to many disbenefits, the most divisive being the determination to use this easy expedient to dodge the creation of gateways and thresholds based on genuine social testings and judgements. The apology for so doing is exactly the same utilised by those who, overlong, administratively maintained discrimination on the grounds of race and disability. The neo-realistic argument of practicality was used. Hence there was a point where women were prevented from doing jobs that included heavy labour, despite the obvious fact that there are hefty women and weedy men. A dramatic instance until the later stages of World War II was the reluctance of the United States military to allow black soldiers to bear arms.

It seems that from cradle to grave we are entrapped by selection by birthday and some of the worst culprits are in the social services. When, in 1991, CPA was commissioned to edit the *British Gas Report on Attitudes to Old Age* (Midwinter 1991), there was a tiff between CPA officers and the polling organisation. CPA was intent on examining the life-style of those in the Third Age, using retirement from full-time employment as a rule of thumb; the polling agency was glued to its age brackets; eventually there was a compromise. The pollsters found a sample from those who were retired and over 55 years of age. But if we are to take the ageist issue seriously, and if we are to make social policy decisions on the basis of people's social rather than chronological status – 'stage' not 'age' in epigrammatic shorthand – then it will be necessary to erase the birthday from the reckoning.

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The concept of ages

Thus, knowing how many people are in the Third Age or, for that matter, the First and Second Ages, is more than a pleasing academic conceit. It was Peter Laslett (1991) who introduced the 'stage' method into British civic life, developing the concept from French thinking (Laroque 1962) during the late 1970s and sophisticating it in a very positive manner. This is now a familiar formula: the First Age of socialisation, the Second Age of work and child rearing, and the Third Age of independent post-work.

There has been controversy over Peter Laslett's designation of a Fourth Age or dependent older age. The question marks over the Fourth Age were that people tended to move in and out of the category, that is, they were sometimes temporarily incapacitated, while 'dependence' is, sadly, a feature in other stages of life. It was also deemed to throw up just that kind of characterisation of older age that has for so long jaundiced public opinion on the very subject of oldness. It should be properly acknowledged that there is another gerontological dispute as to whether or not the extension of people's lives has been procured at the expense of longer phases of decrepitude and disability. Obviously enough, the ideal is to have an extremely lengthy Third Age and an extremely short Fourth Age – achieving the aphorism of the former manager of Liverpool FC, Bill Shankly, who wished 'to die healthy'. For the purposes of this essay (and in strict keeping with the answers I provided for Peter Laslett), the three-part format has been retained.

In case one might become inordinately proud of the modish novelty of this device, it is salutary to note that other ages and societies have attempted similar formulae. Shakespeare's seven ages of man, as mouthed by Jacques in *As You Like It*, is the most eloquent of several such divisions of human life. That said, most of them avoided the birthday as the key and adhered to social traits. This was because in happier times many people did not know their age or, more pertinently, were not required to divulge it for numerous official purposes. However, they were a trifle pejorative. The recruitment of the Holy Family for this purpose in medieval times, for example, had the baby Jesus representing what we moderns would term the First Age, his mother, Mary, denoting the Second Age, and poor Joseph standing for the Third Age and ageing, with just a hint of impotence (Covey 1989).

Peter Laslett calculated his ageing ratios on the basis of birthdays, it being the only data to hand, but his prior concern was with the notion of the Third Age as a liberation and a triumph. It was not so much, as he ceaselessly urged, that some people were living longer lives as that most people were living normal lives. Humankind had discovered the trick

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TABLE 1. *The percentage distribution of the British population by age groups, 1850, 1990 and 2040*

Birth year	Under 20 years	20–59 years	60 or more years
1840	46	48	6
1990	24	55	21
2040	23	48	29

of survival, so that a majority of its number, certainly in the developed nations, was living beyond the period ordinarily devoted to vocational and familial duties. It was the coupling of this phenomenon with the collapse of work and the reduction of family size that had this effect. People were completing their mainline chores of work and child-rearing earlier, even as they were surviving to enjoy normative lifespans. Indeed, so persistent, throughout history and across geography, has been the definition of adult life in terms of work and family raising that one might coin the term 'post-adult' to describe the Third Age period.

Everyone is now familiar with the 'three times three' exposition of the new demography of ages. By way of quick reference, the percentage distribution of the population by age might be described as in Table 1. It is when one turns to the transposition of these figures into social terms that the significance of the First, Second and Third Age conception begins to come to life. Let us take a snapshot of a manual worker during the 1850s and the 1900s, plus one for the 1950s when, as Peter Laslett urged, the United Kingdom 'greyed', and another for the 1990s. Let us assume that each lived the equivalent of a concertina-ed 70 years based on the conditions appertaining at that date.

Characteristic hours of work from the 1850s to the 1990s

The 1850s man typically worked before either retirement or pensions as a national idea were visualised or required. He may have had two or three years schooling, starting work at from 2–3 to 8–10 years of age, with a likely 12-hour day. There would have been Sundays off, together with Good Friday and Christmas Day, and may be a couple of church holidays. If he became non-able, he might have been labelled an 'aged pauper', although death in working harness was very common. My estimates of the hours worked in one year by a man in his prime and in full employment (by no means certain throughout the 19th century), and of the total hours of work during a 70 years life are shown in Table 2.

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TABLE 2. *The percentage distribution by age groups of the British population, 1850, 1990 and 2040*

	1850s	1900s	1950s	1990s
		Thousands of hours		
Annual hours worked in regular prime	3.6	2.7	2.3	1.5
Average hours worked in this 70-year life	220	130	110	45
Working hours as a % of life's duration	33	20	17	7

The 1900s man worked just as the first stirrings of retirement and pensions concerned British politicians (both are, as regular social features, very modern in terms of historical time). His schooling extended from perhaps 3–5 years to 12–13 years of age. Then he would have usually worked a ten-hour day, with a half-day on Saturday, although that meant 8 am to 2 pm (that is why soccer matches traditionally kick off at 3 pm). Apart from Sunday, he would have had six bank holidays and possibly a 'wakes' week, occasionally with pay. 'Aged pauperism' beckoned but the old age pension – about the same rate, incidentally, as what an 'aged pauper' had usually received – was on the horizon.

The 1950s man came halfway between the onset of retirement and pensions and today's conditions. He was straightforwardly schooled from five to 15 years of age and then worked until aged 65, ordinarily with a nine-hour day (and 45 hour week), a ration of bank holidays and possibly a fortnight's holiday. His lifetime hours of work were around one-half of those a century before (Table 2). The 1990s man, with retirement and pensions well established, would have been educated from 3–5 years until 16 years of age, with some end-on college courses and training schemes more likely, even for the manual worker. With a seven/eight hour day, a full week-end off, some 14 bank holidays and up to five or six weeks paid holiday, the working years might have ended with late redundancy or early retirement as young as 55 years. The state pension began at 65 years of age and was followed by a longish retirement.

In summary, it may be pointed out that the 1850s part-mythical toiler would have worked one-in-three of the hours of his life, the 1900s man one-in-five, the 1950s man one-in-six and the 1990s man one-in-fourteen (Table 2). The change from the 1900s to the 1950s was not so marked, but thereafter, as Peter Laslett prophesied, the change was substantial. The 1850s man, watching from his honourable retirement in the Great Aged Paupers Dormitory of the Sky, may be forgiven a wry grin, as his 1990s descendant bemoans the long hours he has to endure.

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TABLE 3. *The percentage distribution of the British population by 'life stages', 1850s, 1900s, 1950s and 1990s*

Birth decade	First age	Second age	Third age
1850s	14	84	2
1900s	21	76	3
1950s	21	67	11
1990s	24	55	21

The concept of stages

Is it possible to put human flesh on the 'stage' bones? This was the crucial question. It is unhelpful to press the value of the 'stage' construct as a policy instrument, if one cannot satisfactorily enumerate the arithmetic. The attempt was made for the present Third Age (Midwinter 1996). This utilised employment data and also key factors like 'age of mother when last child reaches 15 years of age', a rough yardstick of (notional) independence for the youngster (despite the well-discussed instances of later motherhood, it is now 45 years, whereas it was, with larger average families, 50 years in the 1900s). This suggested that in 1995 there were 11.3 million people in the British Third Age, over against 15.8 million who were aged 55 or more years. Very briefly, of these 3.5 million were still employed and thus in the Second Age (2.2 m. male; 1.3 m. female), a sizeable minority of them aged 70 or more years. The over-55s contributed one-in-seven of the men and one-in-ten of the women in employment (Trinder, Hulme and McCarthy 1992).

Moreover, and at much the same time, it was decided to calculate the numbers in the First and Second Ages by way of, so to speak, horizontal comparison, and then to gauge the numbers in the retrospective First, Second and Third Ages of those previous times. This was accomplished by reference to not only employment figures but also statistics for school registrations and 'aged paupers' (Lawson and Silver 1973; Read 1979; Midwinter 1998). These factors were carefully applied. For example, in the later decades of the 19th century, about a third of those over 65 were listed as 'aged paupers', that is, some 400,000. Perhaps because of the emphasis of social historians on the iniquities of the workhouse, it is sometimes forgotten that three-quarters of these were in receipt of 'out-relief'. A generous estimate was made of those lucky enough to have sufficient savings or kindly and reasonably resourced families, but it must be remembered that for most people, especially men, it was a case of seeking work until incapacity was recognised by the harsh terms of the Poor Law guardians. The outcome is presented in Table 3: a gloss on the social

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descriptors above in regard to the manual worker's life span and a summary of the division of the population by 'stages' at the same times.

The incredible shrinking second age

Thus, although the well-advertised fact of the swelling Third Age is certainly apparent, one of its major determinants – absence from the labour market – also affects the First Age, for young people are increasingly denied access to the work-force as readily as old people. Excepting that women now participate in work almost as much as men, and despite some minor ups and downs, the demand for labour has dramatically dropped over time. Although the number of young people is less than at the beginning of the 20th century, the proportion actually in the First Age has been more than maintained. This is because the 'start work age' – a rather more realistic term than the 'school leaving age' – has been pushed later by statutory schooling and the expansion of further education.

In the event, the overarching issue from a policy viewpoint may well be the shrinking Second Age. The sides of the demographic sandwich are, curiously, quantitatively very similar but the 'filling' has grown thinner – so much so that those in the current Third Age may recall from their military service the infamous *Navy, Army and Air Force Institution* (NAAFI) sandwich, which in soldiers' lore had little on the inside.

It should also be recognised that there is a strong case for believing that the 'middle' is the cause and not the effect of the two 'outsides'. It is usually believed that the 'First Age' is a preparation for the 'Second Age', with, crucially, a huge education and training bill accepted as an investment for the future, and with the 'Third Age' as some sort of humanitarian gratitude for a 'Second Age' job well done. The alternative scenario is that education and retirement are both 'consumer goods' as well as, even rather than, 'investment goods'. It could be the other way round. That is, we have an elaborate education and retirement system as a consequence of having a sophisticated and automated economy (Bowman and Anderson 1963; Midwinter 1995). We do not require young or old labour and must find custodial devices for children while their parents are at work and a relatively inexpensive device for ensuring the post-work adults have at least subsistence. The value of long education for the economy is a political *credo*, widely believed, but the evidence is tenuous. It has led, some believe, to 'an inflated credentials market', with a long-drawn education sceptically described as 'a protracted aptitude test'

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(Blaug 1970). According to Walters (1981), 'education is a consequence of national economic growth, a luxury that rich countries can afford, but that is unrelated to the process of economic development'.

Since the last quarter of the 19th century, attendance has ruled the education system, for truancy remains a threat to the social order and pre-schooling is justified on the grounds that it relieves parents for labour. This is as critical an ageist issue as enforced retirement at 60 or 65 years of age. Young people are denied access to the workforce flatly on grounds of age. Should they – as John Stuart Mill held – be able to master whatever the (often irrelevant and arcane) qualifications are demanded before taking up employment at younger ages, they are still banned from so doing. In this respect, there is more in common between the First and Third Ages than between the Second and either of the other two, precisely because the Second Age is the engine that regulates the numbers fore and aft.

Summary

The prognosis is that just over half of the United Kingdom population, say 30 million people, is looking after, economically and socially, something approaching one-quarter of the population in each of the other two sectors. When concerns are expressed about the 'demographic time-bomb' (which, as Peter Laslett acidly remarked, had actually exploded during the 1950s), it is a genuine counter to point to a rise in First Age numbers. When worries are expressed about only 55 per cent of the population being in the 'productive' Second Age, then the rejoinder should be that, by and large, that is the effect of economic and technological advance. The key to the notorious worker-to-pensioner ratio (which CPA officers were, jokingly, banned from using in the 1980s, so misleading was it) is not the ratio as such but productivity. Although there may have been some humane reasons for the exclusion of younger and older people from the workforce, there are much more compelling economic motives for what the 1861 Report of the *Newcastle Commission* (appointed to Inquire into the State of Popular Education in England) called 'the peremptory demands of the labour market'. Much may be learned from re-drawing the demographic map with social rather than chronological contours. The valleys and ridges suddenly alter their shape. Two elements are apparent. It is possible to devise means of scrutinising social issues to do with older age – indeed with all ages – without direct reference to the suffocating birthday. When one does, it provides social analysis with a different and in some ways superior plot.

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NOTE

1 The address was not published but Michael Young's views on the matter were also set out in Young and Schuller (1991).

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