

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE – INDICATIVE OF A DIFFERENT KIND OF SOCIETY

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Abstract:

The article offers a short view on a new perspective concerning the future model of ageing lifestyle. What is called the University of the Third Age (UTA or U3A) represents above all a real cultural revolution born in developed societies. The structure of the article has two parts. The first presents the general context of the emergence of the phenomenon. The second one focuses on a particular exemple represented by the U3A from Liege. The conclusions of the article emphasize the variety of the movement, including in the Romanian experience, as argument for a new social cooperation that should counterbalance traditional approaches.

Key words: university, third age, ageing, mental health

JEL classification: J26, N34, Z13

1. INTRODUCTION

The structural dynamics of the population and the obvious growth tendency in the elderly segment have been, for many years, the topic of numerous studies. The issue of aging was regarded from various perspectives: psychological and behavioural (Baltes & Carstensen, 2008), political and economic (Seshamani & Gray, 2004; Walker, 2006), geographic and medical (Cassarino & Setti, 2015) or sociologic (Turner, 1998). Due to the systemic relation among population, economy, politics and society, it is clear that the approach remains open. And, since regional variations are a natural reality, and the solutions are not unitary, the local/ regional demographic analyses are even more relevant for understanding the diversity of the phenomenon.

2. AGE – REVERSIBLE AND IRREVERSIBLE ASPECTS

Age is one of the demographic variables according to which the members of a community can be grouped. Age is defined as the time span from a being's birth to a certain moment in their life, expressed in years (months, days). This is the *chronological age*, which is relevant for demographic analysis. According to it, a person can be included in the age group corresponding to their year of birth, as well as in larger, cumulative groups, namely the young age group (0-15 years), adult (15-64) or senior (over 60 or 65, often called the "third age"). The increase in the average life expectancy and in the number of the elderly in recent times brought the necessity of further dividing the latter age group into young-old, between 65 and 75 years old, whose functions and performance are generally least affected; the middle-old, between 75 and 85, and the old-old, aged over 85. This classification based on chronological age implicitly includes aspects of the *biological age*, however, without a strict correspondence between the two types of age for the simple fact that not all people age at the same rate and with the same effects on the functions of the biologic organism. Thus, *biologic age* is the physical and physiological state of the organism and organs it contains as they go through a gradual process of maturation and then aging. It is clear that the incidence of disease and disabilities grows dramatically in the case of the middle-old and, especially, in the elderly of the fourth age, 75 and above (or over 80).

Social age refers to the role or status a person has in relation to the other members of the community. It is influenced by history, tradition and cultural customs. Social age is expressed by attributes such as: parent, grandfather, retiree, apprentice, pupil, etc. The transition from one social status to another can be problematic, sometimes, and accepted with difficulty. *Psychological age* is

given by the mental abilities a person can employ as an answer to the change in the environment. It includes memory, as well as self opinion, behaviour and motivations in regard to others, the way of relating to the future. Thus, a person considered elderly from a chronological point of view, can be much younger from a social point of view if he remains active for a longer period of time and even young from a psychological perspective, if his attitudes and behaviour display adaptability and spiritual dynamism.

All these ages relate to individuality, to the human being, the meaning of aging being, in this case, irreversible.

However, in a population, things have a completely different significance. The proportion of the elderly out of the total population is an instrument for general demographic characterization, while the specific community can be characterized as: young, when the percentage of the elderly in its midst is under 7%, aging (7-14%), aged (14-21%) and hyper-aged (over 21%) (Coulmas, 2007). Demographic aging is, in this case, a variable process, i.e. reversible, since it depends on the play of the other demographic factors and phenomena.

The increase in the percentage of the senior population raises a series of issues concerning specific needs, spending free time and recreation, habitation and living conditions, health problems and elder abuse risks. The rapid growth of the “most aged of the seniors” also holds special importance for public policy, since this age segment, due to the natural decline in health, requires specialized and individualized long-term care.

3. SOLUTIONS AND ALTERNATIVES

Many of the countries that reached the stage of a demographic hyper-aging display several types of answers and activities dedicated to seniors. According to the extent of the population segment targeted by these activities, we distinguish the following:

“Silver economy” or the society’s economic adaptation

The broadest way the growth in the senior segment is felt in a society and the one with the greatest impact has an important economic dimension and it is expressed in the consumption pattern. The term “silver economy” became frequently used, especially in European research, after the Bonn conference of February 2005 entitled “Silver economy in Europe”. The syntagm suggests the opportunities for the quality of life, economic growth and competitiveness generated by the production/supply of products/services oriented towards the senior population. “White economy” comes to supplement it and it refers to products, services and activities connected to medical assistance and care for the disabled and the elderly (including dependent) people (OECD, 2012). Combined with an increasing number of people/families without descendants, the phenomenon of demographic (hyper)aging creates a massive demand on the senior care services market. This demand reaches several levels, from domestic work, financial or legal counselling to emotional support. A growing category is that of educated seniors and with high incomes who demand entertainment, tourism and leisure services. Under these conditions, the configuration of the economy as a whole will continue to resettle in the following decades.

Senior retirement homes

A narrower field in point of the number of people concerned, while also being the oldest and most widely known form of society’s evaluation and response to the specific needs of the senior citizens is occupied by retirement homes. Since there is a wide variety of forms and names for these establishments (1), quantitative comparisons are harder to draw. For example, France, one of the European countries with the highest life expectancy levels in Europe, has approximately 111,000 retirement homes (INSEE, France, 2013), while Belgium reports around 135,000 beds in senior care institutions (INAMI, Belgique, 2012), and Romania has less than 500 retirement homes.

University of the Third Age (U3A)

The universities of the third age (U3A) are a novelty in the landscape of alternatives existing in a developed society. The beginnings of the movement were in 1973, with the Toulouse Faculty of

Social Sciences. Subsequently, this academic model was adopted by other European countries (Belgium, Great Britain, Cyprus), as well as on other continents (in Australia, Dominica, New Zealand, South Africa, Japan, etc.). It suffices that at the turn of the millennium, China alone included some 19,300 centers with about 1.81 million members. In the year 2009 Australian and New Zealand UTAs included 211 (64,535 members) and 60 (10,154 members) centers, respectively (U3A Online, 2009). The United Kingdom listed as many as 731 UTAs with a total of 228,873 members in the same period (Formosa, 2010).

Due to its major development, this represents a real and innovative solution that could interest different kind of operators, from public administration to academic environment.

3.1. HISTORY AND ACTUALITY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THIRD AGE (U3A)

The context for the emergence of the University of the Third Age

The end of the demographic transition in most of the Western countries, during the last century, projects a significant change in the structure of the population by an increase in life expectancy and the number of seniors. Together with the improvement of the social protection systems, the pension system and the system of public health, the phenomenon will confront the society with a new problem, that of policies concerning, on the one hand, demographic ageing and, on the other hand, the direct measures for the protection and integration of the seniors.

Simultaneously with this process, in countries such as France, Belgium or Great Britain, there is a return of the interest in education and culture. Between the 6th and the 8th decade, the references to continuous education increase in frequency, such as Pierre Arents' report in France, in 1955, (Vaughan, 1973, Fourquin, 2004) or that of J. A. Simpson on continuous education in England and Wales (Hooper & Osborn, 1975). The same ideology will lead to the emergence of a sub-programme entitled "education and the third age", as part of UNESCO's plan for school, in the 1984-1989 period.

The pioneers of the U3A movement

When, in 1972, professor Vellas creates a program of applied research, its objectives are equally medical, social and cultural. It is conceived as a distinctive academic formula for third age people including activities according to their needs and aspirations. Vellas proposes the idea to the Administrative Council of the Teaching and Research Unit in Toulouse, which included representatives of the professors, students, administrative personnel, as well as the World Health Organisation, International Labour Organisation and, of course, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Formosa, 2010). As a structure subordinated to the university, the institution will provide courses on gerontology to the students enrolled in humanities and medicine (initial training), as well as training courses for various categories of people working with seniors, including preparatory courses for life as a retiree. More than providing instruction, the focus was the psychological effect on the trainees. The essential goal of the project was to stimulate the intellectual activity of the seniors, so as to combat cerebral aging, while the concrete objectives concerned adopting and using all types of education and training (initial training, continuous training and lifelong learning), this time exclusively addressed to people over a certain age (Vellas, 1977).

The Toulouse initiative quickly becomes a model for the promotion of an academic type of movement simultaneously following several aspects: to ensure the integration of seniors, to propose and develop a form of training in gerontology and start a research programme on aging. As the model begins to multiply, the first differences start to appear. More exactly, even though the new "universities" maintain the connection with the academic world, only few of them become active in actual research and training, the largest component becoming that of social and cultural activities.

In the 80s, most members are people over 60 years old, hence the name of University of the Third Age (UTA).

Gradually, these small "universities" within universities become open to a diverse public, reuniting any person with time resources, without age or training restrictions. This will be

immediately registered by the change in name, some organizations starting to call themselves the University for All Ages (*universite tous age*) or the Free Time University (UTL). Still, statistics conducted among the members of three Universities for All Ages (Aubagne, Strasbourg, Nice) in the 90s reveal the absence of people under 49 and an overwhelming majority of the 60-69 year-old segment (<http://perso.numericable.fr/~sitedurtf7/downloads/CG/cgtxtchamahian.pdf>) among those who frequent them. To move away from the university becomes almost an imperative once the phenomenon becomes massive, which is solved by transferring these organizations into an associative status of civil law. The connections with the university continue, however, to be maintained under the form of an agreement to use some locations on campus or of invited lectures delivered by some of the academics. There will also be cases when the label “university” is no longer justified.

The progressive separation from the Velassian model will also occur in other countries with every new formula. Thus, in Great Britain, Peter Laslett rejects the idea of patronage from an actual classic university. Laslett rather wants groups where the members can meet without institutional restrictions and where they can learn things in which they are interested, under the coordination of a leader or a convenor to support them. An important detail in the functioning of what Laslett proposes concerns financing, which must be independent from the state and from public funds. In 1983, in a short while from the first discussions and organizing formulas, three large U3As are created – Cambridge, London and Huddersfield; and, since news travels fast, other ad-hoc groups adopt the idea and materialize the initiative. Thus, after 20 years, the U3A network in Great Britain gathers tens of such structures activating especially in the large cities. A study of UK’s Department for Education reveals the following characteristics of U3A: the average age is 70, women are clearly more numerous than men (74% women), most members are middle class, two thirds found out about U3A by word of mouth. Also worth remembering is that an analysis of the reasons for joining this type of organization lists, in descending order, the need for social interaction, need for knowledge, developing abilities and maintaining mental youth (<http://www.u3a.org.uk/the-u3a-story/file.html>).

4. U3A LIEGE – A LITTLE SOCIAL INDUSTRY

The University of the Third Age in Liege is an example I observed directly during a visit in the spring of 2015.

Created in 1976 (the first European wave of U3As), at the joint initiative of a distinguished politician, Edouard Close, member of the Belgian socialist party, of the Liege University’s Rector and of the Head of CPAS (2), the University for Third Age quickly becomes a dynamic structure. Its weekly activities include courses of foreign languages, artistic animation, sporting activities and trips. After 40 years since its foundation and after a winding path in terms of its locations, its number of members and its general image among them and others, U3A Liege is, at the present, the strongest association of its kind in Belgium and among the most important in Europe.

Organized as an association without lucrative purpose (ASBL), the private law form of association, U3A Liege has almost 3500 members. In the discussion with the current president, Daniel Vandijck (2015), the latter reiterated the fact that the appellative “university” that the association continues to use is based on the etymology of the word, i.e. the general meaning of the term “universal” standing for being open to all, and not on the narrow, purely academic meaning.

The training activities cover an extremely wide range, from arts, literature, history and philosophy, to humanities and political sciences, language classes, diverse techniques (computer sciences, drawing, painting, photography...) and, naturally, sports. The educational offer is constantly updated, at the beginning of the school year, according to the proposals of the members or of the trainers/ teachers.

The entrance condition for students is the minimum age of 50, without minimal education conditions, except for those classes that last several years (in which case the courses from the higher levels can be conditioned by the participation in the training levels).

If the organization of learning activities copies the classic university model with schedules, modules and final exams, and student life transmits the emulation and connectivity specific to youth, the other complementary activities, however, are a more direct reminder of the philosophy behind the creation of these associations. Thus, the annual schedule includes leisure activities, shows, reunions, journeys and hikes, parties and anniversaries, meetings in the university cafeteria.

The U3A Liege association has a periodic journal and its own internet site to inform its members. The community life is extremely lively, all those we conversed with using in their argumentation at least one of the following concepts: socializing, youth, dynamism, mental health.

5. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

U3A are the result of a common project of a few key institutional actors in a university city, and their success is well known – they aimed to tap into the human potential, exercising a new type of involvement and they obtained more than that, as the cumulative effects are at the intersection of the social with the medical, economic and cultural.

At first sight, the culture of Romanian society does not appear favourable to this type of initiative. However, the examples of relatively similar attempts existed even as early as the beginning of the 20th century, under the name of “popular university” (among the promoters Iorga, Dalles, Gusti, etc.). A true network of such associations was created in the inter-war period and they started to be gradually revived after the 90s. Certainly, the first and greatest difference between these Romanian popular universities and the U3A universities is the public involved, too little or not at all aged in the true sense of the world. But since the Romanian demographic perspective in the years to follow will register a noticeable increase in the number of seniors, it is to be expected that an adaptation will follow. After all, the signal that there is a segment of the population potentially interested in another way of spending “silver” time is given by the increasingly frequent appearances of elderly candidates in the faculty (sometimes the second faculty). Naturally, the finality of their endeavour has no connection with a future profession.

All this, only confirm that, beyond appellations, legal status or ties with the academic world, this movement called U3A initially homogeneous, is today a highly pluralistic character and a negligible social role. Throughout evolution, they have adapted to the needs and expectations of older people who refused resolutely consumer status

This fact and others like it must be taken as signals of society that the local solutions for demographic aging no longer can be limited to senior homes. And, for that reason, perhaps the first years should belong to the university itself, together with those of local administration and public institutions!

ENDNOTES

- (1) The quasi-synonymous formulas are as many as traditions, experiences and economic possibilities. Thus, there are terms such as: “maison de repos pour personne âgées” (Belgium), “maison de retraite” or “résidences avec services” (France), “pensions familiales”, “ressources de type familial” or “centre d’hébergement et de soins de longue durée” (Quebec), “établissement médico-social” (Switzerland), “senior housing” (USA), дом престарелых (Russia), etc.
- (2) CPAS - Centre Public d’Action Sociale, public organism for social protection in Belgium (roughly equivalent of DGAS – General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection in Romania)

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