
Rousseau, Inequality, And The Extinction Of Ageism: An Irony

T Papadimos

Citation

T Papadimos. *Rousseau, Inequality, And The Extinction Of Ageism: An Irony*. The Internet Journal of Geriatrics and Gerontology. 2010 Volume 6 Number 2.

Abstract

To the Editor:

Ageism is a fact in modern society.¹ It is defined as prejudice and discrimination against an age group, especially the elderly.² It is a manifestation of a form of prejudice on behalf of those who are younger and those who still can labor effectively as compared to those who are elderly (as defined by the age of > 65 years, although this can be controversial).³ Here we will follow a line of thought regarding the origins of ageism and how an “unnatural” state of man that developed over time leading to ageism, can in turn lead to its extinction. I will posit my dialectic using the work of Jean-Jaques Rousseau.

In Rousseau’s treatise “Discourse on Inequality” he presents his philosophy regarding the nature of man.⁴ According to Rousseau man is naturally good and peaceful. The only naturally inequality among men, generally, was their strength. Man was different from animals in that he was endowed with the attribute of perfectability.⁴ This notion of perfectability allows man to change with time under varying conditions. Animals cannot do this.

As man faced more disasters, people began to form groups, groups led to societies. The concept of perfectability came into play. These societies needed language. Thus, verbal communication ensued. So man eventually evolved out his natural state and moved towards a different station. Along with language came the ability to reason. Under these conditions men began to compare themselves. This act of a man comparing himself to his neighbor was referred to by Rousseau as “amour propre”, a negative motivating principle.⁴ This habit of one man comparing himself to another was not just for pity and/or self preservation, but for one man to dominate another so as to ensure his own happiness or success. Thereafter, property was invented and

there was then a need for a labor force to do the work of the property holders. This, of course, can lead to political upheaval or even war, but in the name of a safe society, property holders convinced the laborers to become a part of “political society”.⁴ With this act, or negotiation, Rousseau claims that moral inequality became a permanent feature of society.

In today’s society the young (at least, those who are not disabled) dominate the old.⁵ The young need jobs to support their families and to acquire and hold property. In Rousseau’s explanation of the natural state of man this would be expected, strength would dominate. However, in modern society the overriding social need of the young to hold property so that they can compare themselves to each other, and establish a hierarchy among each other, is a compounding social motivator that further disadvantages the aging citizen. In other words, there is an acquisition of property occurring currently that is in excess of available scarce resources that focuses on self and not necessarily on the good of the greater society.⁶

Ironically, the dialectic that ageism is reversible in today’s society can be argued from the above mentioned negative motivating principle, “amour propre”. This is because “amour propre” can lead groups of people, not just individuals, to compare themselves with each other. Just as the comparisons of individuals to one another gave way to the comparisons of those who owned property with those who did not, an interesting interrogative arises as to whether this negative motivating principle works on the side of those who have “more age” as compared to those who do not. “Amour propre” may have an evolutionary advantage in the social sense for elders. How so, you may ask?

While man was in his natural state, the physical strength of

the individual was the dominant trait. However, through social evolution elders have grown in numbers and in proportion; protected by the safety net of the political society that Rousseau claimed was rife with moral inequality. Thus, the elderly have the potential to wield political, economic, and social power far into the future. Through their numbers the aged create a political will that cannot be ignored. They vote often, and will be a larger percentage of the vote with the passage of time.⁷ In the same vein they project an economic will: (1) through their accumulated wealth, (2) through their tax contributions, (3) through social/welfare benefits that are paid to them essentially by current tax payers who are their juniors, and (4) by the mere fact that they are living longer, thereby allowing the afore mentioned points (1-3) to persist for an extended period of time.^{7,8} Their increasing numbers in all cultures throughout the planet may well provide a social bias in favor of their position and needs.^{7,8} It may even be that their presence and abidance in the lives of youth, both in their immediate family setting and in extended societal venues may actually enhance their position and influence in society, generally.

There is much to learn by watching the natural progression of aging, from the physical, political, economic, and social contexts. Therefore, it goes without saying that those who are young will become old (if they are fortunate enough to complete their Life Cycle), and that those who would dominate others, will, in turn, be dominated by the passage

of time. The notion of perfectability allowed the evolution of “amour propre”, a negative motivating principle in the eyes of Rousseau that was detrimental to the peaceful nature of the solitary man. However, this condition (amour propre) may provide a protective evolutionary social advantage to the aged. The moral inequality that Rousseau claimed had become a permanent feature of society, through the perfectability of man, may be an irony that will actually help to promote the extincibility of ageism.

References

1. Gullette MM. ‘Frankenfolks’ and the rise of ageism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
2. Merriam-Webster dictionary. Available at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ageism>. Accessed June 28, 2011.
3. Orimo H, Ito H, Suzuki T, et al.: Reviewing the definition of “elderly”. *Geriatr Gerontol Int* 2006;6:149-158.
4. Rousseau J-J. *A discourse on inequality*. London: Penguin Books, 1984.
5. McCann R, Giles H. Ageism in the workplace: a communication perspective. In: Nelson TD, ed. *Ageism: stereotyping and prejudice against older persons*. Boston: MIT Press, 2004.
6. Cramer P: Young adult narcissism: a 20 year longitudinal study of the contribution of parenting styles, preschool precursors of narcissism, and denial. *J Res Per* 2011;45:19-28.
7. Binstock RH: From compassionate ageism to intergenerational conflict? *Gerontologist* 2010;50:574-585.
8. Bloom DE, Canning D, Fink G: Implications of population aging for economic growth. National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2011. Available at: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w16705>.

Author Information

Thomas J. Papadimos, MD, MPH

Department of Anesthesiology, The Ohio State University Medical Center