

# LIVES Impact



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## Ageing in Switzerland: from private to political

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Ageing is a hot topic. Whether we're talking about a new demographic balance, healthcare costs or retirement, it's become commonplace to take an interest in old age, even if we don't always know what to call those who have left youth and middle age behind.

Starting from the debates on the need to rethink the new demographic balance and the associated challenges, we felt it necessary to reflect from a political perspective on the place given to 'older people' in Switzerland. The political treatment of old age is the result of relations of domination between age groups and their crystallisation in the policies, interactions, discourses and representations that shape the daily lives of the country's inhabitants as they grow older. In Switzerland, despite notable exceptions at cantonal and municipal level, such as Vieillir 2030 in the canton of Vaud or Politique de Longue vie in the city of Geneva, this treatment is visible in many of the various initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life of ageing people. These programmes often aim to respond to health imperatives first and foremost, and pay little attention to what the people concerned have to say. In such a context, older people are uniformly portrayed in terms of decline and deficit, while their experiences, resources and desires are invisible. This approach suggests that everything happens in a relatively similar way whether you are ➔

65 or 85, a woman or a man, a migrant or not, and so on. So the variety of experiences of old age attracts little attention.

And yet people do not age in the same way depending on whether they live in a well-off country with supportive social insurance or not, depending on whether they have had an intense working life and a comfortable salary or a turbulent career marked by periods of insecurity and/or migration, depending on whether they are a man or a woman, and so on.

**Ageing is therefore an eminently social phenomenon**, a process that does not take on the same meaning depending on the context being examined. While advancing age affects everyone and causes individuals to rethink their identities (Caradec, 2017), these changes have a social impact and need to be analysed in their socio-historical context.

The sociological reflections set out here form the basis of the book 'Vieillir en Suisse, du privé au politique' (Repetti and Fassa, 2024) and help us to understand that the course of individual ageing is neither inevitable nor a matter of individual logic. Old age is socially constructed, and its 'Swiss-style' version takes a very particular form. These studies are in line with the work of authors such as Carroll Estes (2004), Toni Calasanti and Kathleen Slevin (2007) and Christopher Phillipson (1998). In this way, the choices made in the fields of work, territorial and population management, and social and health insurance categories are closely linked to a conception of the place of all individuals, whatever their age. Thinking about old age in its political dimension thus provides information about the way in which a society organises the relationships between the various groups of people that make it up, and constructs its forms of cohesion.

With regard to old age in Switzerland, the findings of research in this field, which is fortunately increasingly rich, show that

1. **Ageism is a feature of Swiss social policies and representations.** Although difficult to define, this social relationship of age is at the heart of social action (and even the work of certain scientists) and is naturalised and essentialized. As a result, it helps to make invisible the diversity of experiences of ageing and the inequalities that mark them, by reducing people over 65 to members of a single category described in terms of decrepitude, in Switzerland, that of people who have reached the legal age for receiving an AVS pension (65 for everyone from 2028, with women having to work an extra year after the 2021 vote).
2. Although this single reference comes from a history marked by the **centrality of employment and wage-earning** and by the struggles to ensure that those who are no longer -- or not -- able to support themselves benefit from a deferred wage when they leave the labour market, it constitutes the limit at which we are considered to be "old".
3. **Homogenising, naturalising and essentialising a category of the population**, this boundary is now equivalent to a frontier between those who contribute through their (paid) work to the well-being of society as a whole and the others, the various older people, uniformly described as useless and costly.

4. It is often on the basis of this representation that the **various policies organising the lives of people who have left their working life** - or who could, being entitled to a pension - are constructed.

For example, the Family, Generations and Society sector of the Federal Social Insurance Office "deals with issues relating to old age", i.e. policies that are directly or indirectly linked to the AHV. As a result, all the schemes and programmes for old age use this age as the reference threshold. This is also the case in the employment and training markets.

Such a representation underpins the promotion of the active ageing model by the Swiss authorities. This includes continuing to work for as long as possible and engaging in voluntary work to contribute to social cohesion (Federal Council, 2007). For the most advantaged fringe of the population, continuing to work beyond AHV retirement age represents an opportunity to make better choices about how to combine ageing, employment and retirement. For others, however, it is not possible to remain in the labour market, partly because of the working conditions (physical and mental strain) and partly because there are few employers able to provide them with jobs. In addition, career extension policies rarely provide access to training to cope with current economic and technological changes, with continuing vocational training, the majority of the costs of which are borne by employers, diminishing from the age of 50 onwards.

Lifelong learning for the over-65s remains very marginal, as it is not, or only very partially, supported by the public authorities and employers (for example, universities for the 3e age group receive no financial support from the Confederation - Campiche, 2017).

This reading of the social world overlooks the 25% of older people working beyond retirement age, just as it overlooks the lack of choice as regards the possibility of maintaining one's participation in the world of employment and the difficulties and discrimination faced by older workers (36% of unemployed people over 60 face long-term unemployment) (Le Feuvre et al.). It also masks the importance of unpaid work provided by people outside employment, work that is more than necessary for social cohesion (28% of care for under-13s is provided by their grandparents - 36% by institutional care) (Leimgruber, 2013 ; Fassa et al., 2023 ; Repetti, 2018).

This ageist approach continues and exacerbates the inequalities that have marked women's careers, especially as a large proportion of them remain heavily involved in care activities related to bringing up children or looking after adult relatives. It is also particularly detrimental to people whose backgrounds have been marked by migration, especially women. It makes it difficult to imagine that ageing is often combined with poverty in Switzerland, with 15.5% of the over-65s considered to be poor, while this is the case for only 6.6% of the 18-64 age group as a whole (FSO, 2024). From this point of view, and contrary to common perceptions, the poverty rate increases with age in Switzerland, whereas it decreases on average in 16 of the European and North American OECD countries. ➔

Thinking of people over 65 in terms of deficits and impairments also prevents attention from being paid to other phenomena: failure to take up entitlements to social benefits; specific difficulties linked to digital procedures; isolation, whether geographical or social. This approach to old age also restricts consideration of the effects of territorial inequalities on older people, with rural areas often offering fewer opportunities and resources than urban areas. It is based on a conception of the social world that de facto limits the citizenship of the over-65s, giving them less of a say than younger people. Thinking about the diversity of ages -- over 65! over 85! -- is one way of doing this. Some initiatives, such as the "Demain seniors" participatory laboratory that took place in January 2024 in the town of Lancy, are an inspiring example, and we should no longer be in a position to ignore the principle widely used in the world of disability "Nothing about us without us" when it comes to people over 65. ■

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