

The Case against Chronologization

Changes in the Anglo-American Life Cycle, 1600 to the Present

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The modern life cycle is normally seen as becoming more standardized and tightly scheduled according to certain age norms. Recent research on the American and British course suggests that the “chronologization” thesis is oversimplified because it ignores social and cultural definitions of aging, discounts diversity by class, ethnic group, and gender, and, furthermore, does not take into account the recent tendency toward a greater fluidity in the definition of age. It also overlooks the role of culture, and especially ritual, in defining age in recent as well as more distant periods. Looked at in an anthropologically informed manner, the history of the life cycle since 1600 is shown to have developed in three overlapping periods: Early Modern (1600–1850), Modern (1850–1950), and Contemporary (1950 to the Present).

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Just as surely as the past shapes the present, so the present determines our understanding of the past. Recent interest in the history of aging and the life cycle reflects the fluidity of contemporary age patterns. What only a few years ago were regarded as timeless fixtures of the laws of human development are now seen as mutable and historically determined. It all began with Philippe Ariès’ brilliant exploration of the history of childhood and, then, in response to the unrest of the later 1960s, turned to youth and adolescence. In the 1970s, when the problem of the elderly became more central, historians began to turn their attentions to old age. Now that mid-life is the focus of so much discussion, we have our first histories of middle age (Hareven, 1982, Ariès 1962, Kett 1977, Gillis 1974, Fischer 1977, Demos 1986).

The history of the life course is still at a very early stage, but, if there is a predominant view, it is that today’s life cycle is more “tightly

scheduled and interlocked than in the past” (Musgrove & Middleton 1981: 42). One American study, focusing on the transition from youth to adulthood, concludes that “growing up as a process has become briefer, more normful, bounded, and consequential – and thereby more demanding on individual participants” (Modell & Furstenberg & Herschberg 1976: 30–31). Another, finds “more regulation according to specific age norms...” (Hareven 1982: 15).

Summarizing both American and European studies, Martin Kohli uses the term “chronologization” to describe the process by which the life course has become routinized and certain age norms standardized across class, ethnic, and gender boundaries (Kohli 1985: 271–303).

Those who subscribe to the chronologization thesis would draw a sharp division between past and present, between before industrialization and after. As they see it, the prein-

dustrial family defined a person's status, regardless of age. The head of a household retained his power as long as he was able to function as master, whereas, today, a man is forced to retire at a specified age, and is automatically assigned to the euphemistic status of senior citizen. The beginnings of this trend are traced to the nineteenth century, when age norms supposedly came to define the lives of an ever larger part of the population.

This is a seductive thesis, but, like the structural/functionalist modernization theories on which it is based, it oversimplifies the past, overgeneralizes the present, and distorts the future. The history of the life cycle is by no means so uniform nor so linear as this particular telos would suggest. The theory falsely subsumes the experience of women under that of men, ignores class and ethnic differences, and reifies the life cycle in such a way that individuals are denied a role in defining the meaning of their own lives. Those who accept the chronologization thesis see the history of the life cycle as a funnel, moving at an accelerating pace in a uniform direction. In what follows, I will attempt to show that the developments of the last four centuries are best seen as an hour glass turned horizontal, narrowing in the middle but open at both ends.

I.

Chronologization theory's rendering of history into before industrialization and after does not do justice to either the past or the present. If it is possible to generalize on the basis of British and American experience, the history of the life cycles is best conceptualized as three overlapping phases, designated here as Early Modern (from 1600 to 1850), the Modern (1850–1950), and Contemporary. It is this tripartite history, and its relationship to changing notions of aging and self, that is the focus of this paper.

What I have defined as the Early Modern period was characterized by a marked indifference to considerations of numerical age. While art and literature recognized the so-called ages of man, these were more socially than numerically defined. Aging was understood as a fluid,

discontinuous, non-linear process, in which rapid transitions (including reversals) were followed by periods of timeless stasis. Life, like the body itself, was not seen as a self-regulating system, but was conceived of as supernaturally rather than naturally determined.

In the Anglo-American world, childhood was supposed to end around the age seven; youth was presumed to last to age thirty; and contemporaries talked of old age as beginning at sixty (Smith 1982, Muchembled 1985: 48ff). However, the passage of years was not marked with any regularity. People might celebrate significant anniversaries, but they did not make a fuss over birthdays. As late as the First World War, Devonshire farm children asked to give their birth dates replied (*Reports and Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 1917):

“Our Charlie's birthday is when they cuts the corn, and Alice's is when they ears the corn.”

On the Continent, name days were more important than birthdays until the nineteenth century; and, even when birthdays began to be celebrated in upper class circles, they were for children, not for adults (Droste 1979, Weber-Kellermann 1987). In seventeenth and eighteenth century North America, there was no strong sense of the passing of years until old age; and then no reason for social celebration (Demos 1986: 155–156).

There were no universal numerical markers, because there were as yet no universal ages to be marked. Biology was not the object of ritual attention in Early Modern Europe. There were no such things as puberty rites, and the initiations associated with apprenticeship and service were not age specific (Gillis 1974: 6–7, Thomas 1976). Age of majority varied greatly not only across Europe, but within particular countries. Adulthood as such was not age specific, for, until the seventeenth century, the age of majority in England varied according to social status, being age 21 for nobles, age 15 for commoners (*Report of the Committee on the Age of Majority* 1966–67: 21–22). A boy could marry without parental consent as young as fourteen, a girl at age twelve. Inheritance de-

pended not on age, but on gender, birth order, and the demographics of particular families. The fate of individuals depended not on their date of birth, but on the date of death of a parent or guardian.

Schooling was not yet age specific. Children and youths moved in and out of formal education according to demands on their labor and services. Even among privileged males, it was rare for individuals to proceed in an age-graded sequential manner. Thus, at Oxford University, boys as young as thirteen shared the collegiate life with men in their late twenties, an age gap that did not begin to narrow until the mid-nineteenth century (Gillis 1974: 103, Kett, 1978: 205–211).

Military service, novitates, apprenticeships were no more age specific than schooling. First marriage, which at this time was universally regarded as the passage to adulthood, tended to occur late for both men and women, with ages varying considerably. When second marriages (which could account for as much as 40% of all marriages) are taken into account, the age range is much greater (Segalen 1986: 20–36, 107–131). A peasant's sense of the appropriateness of marriage was determined not by birth date but by birth order. And this powerful sense of seniority was built into the wedding rites themselves, which made a great fuss over older siblings who had been passed over, thus restoring them to the pool of eligible persons (Gillis 1985: 72).

Not until the later nineteenth century did Americans and Europeans begin to think of aging as a natural process. Only then was numerical age supposed to tell a great deal about a person; it became a source of certainty, if not of comfort. For Early Modern people, however, aging, like the body itself, was not an inner directed thing. It was influenced by external forces, including the supernatural, forces which, while they could be controlled to some extent through rituals of religion and magic, were nevertheless unpredictable and the cause of considerable anxiety. Aging did not give automatic access to adulthood and thus a sense of orderly progression. This was a major reason why birth, apprenticeship, and marriage were so highly ritualized, exercises in creating that

sense of being which age by itself could not secure.

As Barbara Myerhoff has pointed out, "ritual is predominant in all areas of uncertainty, anxiety, impotence, and disorder" (Myerhoff 1984: 305). The Early Modern baptism or wedding, invariably public and highly ritualized, created a sense of order and certainty in an age system which was otherwise fluid and ambiguous. The rite of transition of childhood to youth, which for boys took the form of breeching, was linked less to age than to birth order. Whether a breeching occurred early or late depended on whether the family needed an additional hand (Ariès 1962: 58, Greven 1977: 284, Macfarlane 1977: 90). The highly publicized betrothal and big wedding did not announce maturity; they created it. And, like all rituals, these rites created what Myerhoff describes as a sense of "flowing duration," accounting for that timeless, static quality that was attributed to the prime of life in the Early Modern period (Myerhoff 1984: 324–325, Demos 1986: 98).

Marriage marked the great boundary between youth and adulthood. Everywhere it was the major rite of passage for both men and women, initiating them into the privileged circle of householders, endowing them with the status and power denied to the unmarried. These elaborate rites had the power of transforming mere youths into respected elders in a what seems to us an indecently brief period of time. Betrothals were short, lasting only about three months; and the big wedding removed the young people from their families of origins and transformed them into privileged masters and mistresses in a few hours or days, without the extended honeymoon that the nineteenth century came to think of as necessary to marital adjustment (Gillis 1985: chapter II). While it is not possible here to describe these rituals in detail, it should be sufficient to say that we find this instant, indeed magical, transformation strange because it is based on a notion of self very different from the modern model of an independent internally driven system. Nineteenth century notions of the autonomous, tightly bounded self virtually precluded the kind of rites practiced in the Early Modern period, which assumed the mutability of the

self and the relativity of age (Muchembled 1985, Demos 1986, Carrithers & Collins & Lukes (eds) 1985, Heller & Sosna & Wellbery (eds) 1986).

Early Modern notions of self explain the ease with which young people stepped in and out of both age and gender roles at moments of carnival and charivari. The unselfconscious childishness of adults on festive occasions is further evidence of a view of life that was nonlinear, indeed reversible. This fluidity was a quality which greatly disturbed seventeenth century British and American Puritans, the first group to systematically repudiate ritual on the grounds that it violated the "real" self (Burke 1987: 223–238). It is significant that they were also the first to insist on setting minimum ages in all things, from marriage to drinking, a demand which reflected a concept of a linear internally directed aging still very alien to the understandings of most of their contemporaries (Thomas 1976: 227–230).

The Early Modern model of self was congruent with high mortality rates, which virtually precluded a linear, predictable life course. The notion of the steady development of a "career" was also discouraged by the character of the Early Modern economy, which did not assign tasks on the basis of numerical age but on the grounds of status. Even in family matters, age was indeterminant. Frequent death meant that families were constantly reconstituted; stepparenting was frequent and parenting itself must be described as an extensive rather than intensive undertaking. There was no place for the nineteenth century notion of paternal or maternal instinct in a world where families were so often constituted on a non-biological basis. The idea of childhood itself was blurred by the fact that it was a status shared by offspring with the apprentices and servants of the household (Demos 1986: 37, Gillis 1974: 14–20, Imhof 1987).

II.

It is not easy to fix a date for the beginning of distinctly Modern ideas about the life cycle. We can catch glimpses among radical Protestant groups as early as the sixteenth and seven-

teenth centuries, though their views did not gain ascendancy until much later. The differentiation of infancy from childhood, childhood from adolescence, middle age from old age which began to be universal in the mid-nineteenth century, did not complete itself until the 1940s and 1950s across all classes and ethnic groups, however. And, even then, male and female experiences of aging remained in some respects quite different. To take one example, the new definition of male adolescence visible at the end of the nineteenth century was largely an upper class, male phenomenon; and, even as late as the Second World War, there was a large part of the population, perhaps even a majority, whose lives were not yet synchronous with this supposedly invariable stage of the life cycle.

We can trace the chronologization of men's lives with greater precision than we can women's. The invention of adolescence was partly a religious phenomenon. By the early nineteenth century, Catholics as well as Protestants had moved confirmation up from infancy to the age of discretion of fourteen, discarding older rites in favor of catechism, a sign that they now saw maturation as a product of inner development rather than external or magical transformation (Thomas 1976: 224). At the same time, the conversion experience, which had previously occurred at the time of marriage, was moved down to the early teen years, thus establishing the lower limit of the new adolescence (Demos 1986: 100).

As Ariès was the first to demonstrate, schooling also had much to do with the creation of this particular conception of the life cycle (Ariès 1962: 241–285). In the nineteenth century, it was elementary schooling rather than breeching that defined the boundary between infancy and childhood; by the end of the century, secondary education had reinforced the notion of adolescence (Gillis 1974: chapter III). In elite schools for boys, the notion of a sequential, age graded education had become the norm. In time, what was socially created came to be regarded as biologically determined. Precocity, which had been so highly regarded earlier, now came to be feared as a violation of the "normal" rules of growth (Kett 1978: 205–211).

Bourgeois male social values were reified into natural laws by the emerging biological and psychological sciences, which, at the turn of the century, were obsessed with the problem of the synchronization, not only in the school, on the drill ground and athletic field, but in all spheres of work and leisure (Meyer 1986).

Chronologization was powerfully reinforced by the development of the nation state, which raised the question of the age qualification for citizenship, and, by creating mass armies, fixed the draft age, which rapidly became the measure of manhood (Weber 1976: 474–475). Now, for the first time, the age of majority took on meaning for those outside the propertied classes.

However, the chronologization of the working classes and immigrant groups was never complete even by the Second World War. As long as secondary schooling continued to be exceptional, the dependency and exclusion from the adult world that adolescence entailed evoked considerable resentment and resistance among young workers, especially males. They particularly resented the fact that the leisure and courting behaviors considered by their class as signs of manliness were now stigmatized as abnormal and delinquent (Gillis 1974: 170–183, Humphries 1981). Among working class males, the teen years were not routine steps along a clearly defined career line. They entered into a world of “boy labour” fraught with uncertainty and anxiety, and into a social limbo in which status was not given but fought for. Among working class males, ritual remained one of the major ways identity was established and defended. The proliferation of rites of masculinity, one of the peculiar characteristics of male youth culture for much of our century, was a reflection of the persistence of an older magical attitude toward the self, one that remained at odds with the bourgeois notions of adolescence (Brake 1985: 163–183).

Synchronization was no more complete by gender than by class. On the whole, women were much less affected by chronologization because they were still regarded as “relative creatures,” not as individuals with careers of their own. For upper class women, “coming

out” in the late teens remained the most important event prior to marriage (Davidoff 1973: 49–55, Rundquist 1987). Working class women, who earlier in the nineteenth century had work lives parallel to those of men, found themselves increasingly isolated in the timeless world of the home. Because of the strict division between men’s and women’s work that characterized the early twentieth century phase of capitalist industrial development, most women excluded from the employments that required age graded training. Their work was now increasingly confined to the domestic sphere, where neither time nor age had the same fixed linear meanings (Lewis (ed.) 1986).

Whereas adult men involved in an increasingly bureaucratized and rationalized world of work came to have an ever stronger sense of an inner directed process of development, women’s sense of self remained closer to that which had prevailed in the Early Modern period. Up to a certain point, the lives of girls paralleled that of boys. As long as they were in school, the genders shared a common sense of aging. However, as marriage approached, girls lives became increasingly ritualized, a sign of the greater uncertainty and anxiety that was becoming a part of the female life cycle in the first half of the twentieth century. A sense of the flux of time normally did not end until a woman was married; and when the rituals of the wedding created that sense of “flowing duration” associated with the new motherhood. Susan Allen Toth remembered from her Iowa childhood of the 1940s that (Toth 1981: 112):

“All the girls wanted to go on having birthday parties. After kindergarten, boys stopped attending, but we girls conspicuously observed each passing year. We felt we had special limits to our lives, particular a certain number of years, perhaps twenty-five to thirty to get married. Birthdays all led up to marriage, when life stopped.”

In the 1950s and 1960s marriage ended even an educated woman’s sense of becoming, locking her into a state of being from which, unlike a man’s career, had no retirement date. This gendered sense of self was reflected in the

greater ritual involvement of women at the time of marriage, a phenomenon already visible among middle class women in the Victorian period, which gained momentum among working class females in the 1920s and 1930s, and culminated in the cult of the white wedding in the post-war period.

The first half of this century saw a marked return to church marriages and an expansion in the scale and expense of the wedding ceremony to the point that it began to resemble the big weddings of the Early Modern period. But, whereas men had been at least as much involved as women in the old peasant and artisan wedding rites, now marriage was a distinctly female rite of passage. It was the bride, dressed in ceremonial white, who was the focus of ritual attention; it was she who was the subject of magical transformation. The groom, attired in ordinary clothes, assumed the role of spectator, because, for him, it was not the wedding but the first mortgage that was life's most memorable moment (Gillis 1985: chapter V, Musgrove & Middleton 1981: 39–55).

By the 1950s, a man's readiness for marriage was increasingly thought of as a function of numerical age, a reflection of the tighter scheduling of the male life cycle. American studies show that men were leaving school, entering work, and leaving home later, but marrying and establishing households earlier. The transition from dependent youth to full adulthood, which in the nineteenth century had taken an average of twenty-two years for American men to complete, was by 1960 taking only about fourteen. The variation of ages of marriage was also lessening (Modell & Furstenberg & Strong 1978). The process was now seen in naturalistic, normative terms; and, unless a man was married by the right age, he was considered a failure by his peers and a problem by the developmental psychologists. In the 1950s, it was not uncommon to regard "a single man over thirty a pervert, a person with severe emotional problems, or a poor creature fettered to mother" (Ehrenreich 1983: 14).

The male sense of life as a linear, internal process was partially the result of the decline of mortality in the early years of the century. As

both child and adult mortality fell, life not only became more predictable but the nature of reproduction was transformed. Families became smaller and the timing of children more regular. Declining mortality in a period when divorce was still extremely rare virtually eliminated stepparenting, and thus intensified the identification between the individual parent and the individual child. However, in the context of an economy which made an increasingly sharp division between men's and women's work, this had very different effects according to gender.

Motherhood had taken on a new form, focused less on fecundity and more on those spiritual qualities which were supposed to characterize a good mother. As the physical events of birth became less ritualized, marriage, focused on an idealized vision of wife and mother, became more so. In the nineteenth century, most advice literature had been directed to men, as if they were the ones who needed training in good parenthood. Now it was women who received the praise and the blame for everything that happened to children (Lewis (ed) 1986, Demos 1986: 42–64). The father, now cast in the role of breadwinner, became a detached figure, less involved in and affected by the changing relationships within the family. His life was now seen as linear and age graded, while the mother's life, so much more involved with the lives of other family members, remained relative. She was young or old depending on how old her children were, whether they were still at home or out of the nest. For most women, aging remained a contingent, often discontinuous process; and, for those working class women, who were responsible not only for their own families but for their daughters', life had no sense of development (Willmott & Young 1954: 70–73). In the early twentieth century, men became accustomed to celebrating the passing of time in an individualistic manner – from the twenty-first birthday through the retirement dinner – but, for women, the important markers are more likely to be collective ones, like the newly invented Mother's Day or the family reunion, social rituals which emphasized the timeless, selfless qualities of adult women's lives (Gillis 1985:

254–255, Hausen 1984). Thus, the ethnography of aging also suggests that the chronologization thesis applies more to men than to women, whose experience of aging was far more ambiguous, and more like that of the Early Modern era.

III

Given their greater exposure to deterministic notions of aging, it is not surprising therefore that it was men, not women, who were the first to rebel against the tyrannies of time. In America, the revolt against lock step notions of development began among middle class men in the 1950s, preceding by almost two decades the more publicized women's liberation movement (Ehrenreich: chapters II–V). During the past twenty years the life cycle has undergone radical reconsideration. Not only have new phases been added – the pre-teens, young adults, the young-old and the old-old – but the whole concept of step-by-step development has been directly challenged by the ideas associated with the so-called “growth psychology,” which proclaims the life course to be a kind of do-it-yourself project (Keniston 1970, Neugarten 1974, Demos 1986: 131, Ehrenreich 1983: 88–98). The idea of adolescent crisis has been challenged; and concepts of aging, which assumed the inevitable decline of mental and bodily faculties, are now under revision (See *Psychology Today* 1987). With the discovery in the 1970s of the mid-life crisis, there has been an avalanche of prescriptive literature, providing countless strategies for personal growth (Sheehy 1977, Gould 1979).

These changes in perception of aging are now reflected in the very institutions which were originally responsible for the chronologization that took place in the 1850–1950 period. Schooling is now becoming much less age specific. Pupils are now being promoted by achievement rather than age; precocity is again encouraged; and, with the return of the child prodigy and the invention of the “mature student,” the age spread of universities has come to resemble the Early Modern pattern (Chance & Fischman 1987, Elkind 1987). In the United States, the age of majority, which

seemed to securely anchored at twenty-one, was first lowered in the 1960s and then, out of a concern with teenage drinking, raised again in the 1980s. The current debate over the age of criminal responsibility and the move to abolish mandatory retirement has also put into question the boundaries of adulthood.

As early as 1959, Edgar J. Friedenberg called attention to the “vanishing adolescent.” In the past two decades, the teen years have lost much of their special character. This is due in part to the astonishing revival of the part time juvenile labor market. Today, most children go to work out of desire not necessity, but their new access to these experiences (including sexuality) once reserved for adults, has called into question previously clear age distinctions (Friedenberg 1959). No less disconcerting is the invasion by adults of spheres of sport, clothing, and leisure once reserved to the young (Kohli 1985: 300–301). In this era of the blue jeans, the life cycle is losing its apparent fixity and coming to be seen as much more fluid.

The life course is clearly becoming flatter, losing its progressive linearity to the extent that it is possible to think of it as reversible. For the male generations of the 1940s and 1950s, the draft provided a particularly sharp contour to the life course (Modell & Furstenberg & Strong 1978: 145). Now, with this gone, the process of becoming a man has become a much more extended, and, some would argue, problematic. In the present troubled economic conditions, career lines have ceased to be so certain or so continuous. The life-time job is disappearing. Many men have been forced to retrain, reeducate, and, in the jargon of our day, “recycle,” a word that suggests a return to an older, non-linear concept of life. It could even be said that there has been a “feminization” of the male life cycle, with the result that men are being told that they too must learn to be relative creatures, to change, and to adopt a more fluid identity. To quote one of the most popular American advice books: “One of the worst mistakes in middle age is to confine oneself – and to continue to define oneself – by a single source of identity” (Sheehy 1982: 294).

Women's lives were never so tightly sched-

uled as men's, and it is ironic that a certain "masculinization" of women's lives is taking place at a point in time when men have rebelled against chronologization. Nevertheless, the notion of career has become important to educated women in the 1970s and 1980s. Particularly in the teens and twenties, women's lives are becoming more synchronous with men's. Ironically, by postponing marriage and childrearing in the name of careers, they are creating new uncertainties, however. Leaving home and starting career no longer coincide so closely with starting a family. In the United States, children once left home for good; now, partly in response to economic difficulties, they are likely to return for extended periods. But an even greater challenge to chronologization is posed by changes in heterosexual relations, which have eroded distinctions between the married and unmarried, thus blurring the once clear dividing line between youth and adulthood. The rapid growth of cohabitation in both the United States and Europe poses a challenge not only to the notion of the "normal" family, but to the standardized life cycle (van de Kaa 1987: 12-18).

An increase in single parenthood has also blurred the boundaries of adulthood. However, nothing has so disturbed the sense of a fixed developmental sequence than the astonishing growth of divorce and remarriage in the last two decades. After more than a century of lifetime marriage, divorce plays virtually the same role that death once did. In fact, the rates of marital breakup and stepparenthood are now the same as they were in the Early Modern period (Demos 1986: 63, Gillis 1985: chapter XI).

In many respects, contemporary family relations have come full circle. Parenting is once again an extensive rather than intensive experience. Divorce and remarriage means that many persons are mothering or fathering children not born to them. Under these circumstances, mothering has come to be seen as less a matter of "instinct" and more of learning. But, at the same time, fatherhood has come to take on new importance. Men are no longer distant figures, whose careers totally define their lives. Now that they are once again more

involved with their children, their sense of themselves is more relative. The eagerness with which men are seeking entry into the previously female rite of birthing may well be a sign that, now that age no longer provides identity, they are seeing certainty and assurance in the ritual ways that women have traditionally done (Edwards & Waldorf 1984: chapter IV, Weibust 1987).

Parenting is also becoming less age specific, not only because some women are having their children later, but also because of the contemporary overlapping of generations and the emergence of the "new grandparenthood," in which older persons have become much more involved with their grandchildren (Furstenberg & Cherlin 1986). As a result, the meaning of what is to be a child has undergone a corresponding transformation. Childhood, like parenthood, is now seen less as a universal, timeless phenomenon and more as a relative thing, constantly changing. It is not by chance that historians have discovered the historicity of childhood and youth at precisely this moment. It is also significant that in the new family therapy it is relationships rather than individual identities that are the focus. The idea of the family as a bounded, timeless essence, with its own laws of development and thus absolute right to privacy is dissolving as rapidly as that of the autonomous, internally driven self. New psychological theories now present the self as less the product of timeless, universal drives, and more as a historically contingent construct of relations with others (Chodorow 1986). We may regret the disappearance naturalistic concepts, like childhood innocence and parental instinct, but we should welcome the new emphasis on children's rights and the return to the Early Modern notion of extended parenthood, in which no person has the right to abuse a child, even his or her own offspring (Demos 1986: chapter IV).

IV

I suggested at the outset that we should view the history of life cycles as an hour glass: variant and diffuse in the Early Modern period; increasingly synchronous and standardized

(for upper class males) from the 1850s through the 1950s; and now again fluid and contingent. This does not mean, of course, that life courses today are exactly like they were in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In every measurable respect, they are very different. On the other hand, it is age as a subjective experience and not age as an observed quantity that is at issue here. I only wish to suggest that today's experience of the ambiguity of age is more like that of the Early Modern than like that of which is defined above as the Modern era.

It is this ambiguity which is currently reflected in the *reritualization* of certain phases of the life cycle. For much of the twentieth century, adolescence has been the most ambiguous and therefore the most ritualized part of the life cycle. Now, as Barbara Myerhoff has demonstrated, it is elderly persons, a group similarly excluded from the scheduled routines of production and reproduction who are becoming our most prolific ritualists (Myerhoff 1978). Until recently, women were more ritualistic than men. Now, however, there is evidence that, as men begin to experience life as less linear and continuous, they too have come to appreciate the importance of ritual in creating a sense of certainty and reassurance. Men who want to take up the new fatherhood need that sense of self that birthing rites provide; older men, facing the mid-life crisis, can take stock of life in the recently invented fortieth and fiftieth birthday celebrations (Myerhoff 1984: 311 ff, Bringéus 1987).

There is no lack of commercialized response to the breakup of the old certainties of aging. We have been deluged by advice books, fitness centers, specialized vacations and resorts – all offering respite and renewal. Some would argue that the *reritualization* process currently under way is nothing but the expression of an aggressive consumer capitalism, which has commodified age along with everything else in life. However, it would be foolish to deny the social and cultural authenticity of this ritual renaissance. If the current trend continues, as I think it will, we are likely to see further ritualization of the life cycle as both men and women attempt to bring order and meaning to their lives through the symbols and ceremo-

nies they themselves appropriate or invent. This fact offers an opportunity as well as a challenge to ethnographers and folklorists, for it suggests the historicity of all rites of passage and the need to study the aging process in its specific social and cultural contexts.

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