

ACTIVE AGEING: THE NARRATIVES OF AGENCY AND CRISIS

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Résumé

Cet article analyse le discours tenu sur le vieillissement actif par les gouvernements, les ONG et les médias. Dans ces discours, la notion de crise joue un rôle important. L'objectif de cet article vise à analyser le discours sur le vieillissement actif en période de crise ainsi qu'à en explorer les relations.

Mots-clés

Crise, vieillissement actif, discours, images

Abstract

On the examples of governmental, NGO's and media discourses on the active ageing, the author examines the thesis that those narrations reveal images of contemporary culture about itself and the society. In those discourses the notion of crisis (understood as not only economical but also demographic, welfare state and social crises) plays an important role.

Keywords

Crisis, active ageing, discourse, images

INTRODUCTION

In this article “crisis” will be investigated as having a number of dimensions: the “practical” (as fiscal or state crises) and the more abstract, referring to the social (culture, social bonds, socialisation crises) (see: Tyszka 2014, Znaniecki 2013).

The concept of active ageing existed before the economic crisis and its popularity is not usually interpreted as the political answer to the crisis. Moreover, in 2012 (European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations) references to the crisis were rare and were more usually associated with the notion of solidarity between generations than active ageing. However, active ageing as a policy paradigm can be considered to be linked with crises of any type for several reasons.

Firstly, one of the main assumptions of active ageing is that maintaining good physical and mental condition into old age and working longer is seen as beneficial to economic growth. Secondly, although it has not been widely cited, the EY2012 year of solidarity between generations was conceived as a response to the crisis because of a particular understanding of solidarity that is associated with the reduction of pension “burdens”. The third reason needs the crisis to be understood from the perspective of the non-economic domain of the social world.

From this perspective, active ageing narratives reveal concern not only about future generations’ pensions or provisions, but also a fear of the unknown that might be a result of the crisis and the (predicted) collapse of modern institutions such as welfare provisions, state pensions, etc. which were not only safety nets but also structured citizens’ lives into predictable and well-defined stages (see: Guillemard 2005). From this point of view the narrative of the (welfare) state, community, engagement and inclusion can be interpreted as a series of neoliberal catchwords hiding the withdrawal of the welfare state and the discourse of making citizens responsible for their own wellbeing (see for example: Rose 2008, Beck 2002).

While not denying this interpretation, in the following pages this author would like to show a different interpretation of the connection between the crisis and active ageing. At the heart of the proposed interpretation lies the assumption that policies and documents can be seen not only as communiqués of the relations between politics, economics and many other powers, but also as hints of what may lie in the “unconscious” of society. In this sense they “speak” about the fear of a crisis that encompasses and reaches beyond economics and daily politics. The question is whether there is a crisis or a different phenomenon? To answer this question institutional and non-institutional discourses about active ageing will be examined as means of communication between social and institutional actors (how, if at all, the notions of active ageing and active seniors are defined and re-defined by the state, NGOs, and the media) and in society (what is the vision of society produced by its politically active members¹)

¹ I assume that though they are (differently) privileged positions politicians, experts and NGO’s members are at the same time members of the society. However it is risky to treat their « messages » as messages of the whole society, they can be at least be interpreted as class dependent and in this sense showing the views and fears of some of the classes. Moreover the tensions in the political field may reflect and/or affect other social fields.

CRISIS OR CRISES? A FEW REMARKS ABOUT CRISIS AND COMMUNICATION

Concerning the narratives of crisis we must first ask what kind of crisis or crises they are about. An important clue about the nature of crises can be found in Foucault (2004, 69-72), who said that the crises of capitalism are not identical to liberalism crises. The crisis of liberalism is a turbulence that meets thought (perceiving and defining of political problems) in terms of modes of governing. In other words, this is a problem with defining policies, subjects, the role of the state. Furthermore, how the policies picture their subjects reflects what types of thoughts about society as such are prevalent (at least at some part of this society).

Three types of crises that the research material refers to can be distinguished. The first is the financial crisis of 2008, its outcomes and solution (the crisis and austerity burdens in Greece are treated in public discourses and media as idiosyncratic²). Besides the financial crisis, the welfare state crisis seems to be a subject of media and political discourse, mainly related to fiscal problems. The third and most common kind of narrative about the crisis that can be found in the discourses on ageing gives new meaning to the term: the demographic or ageing crisis. The ageing crisis refers to an increasing life expectancy and falling fertility rate. The process of demographic ageing of the population is perceived as threatening or at least influencing pension schemes, welfare provisions and social services, especially health and caring. In other words, the types of crises can be classified as economic, welfare state, and social.

The economic crisis and its associated myths pervade other kinds of crisis narratives. However, in this article the main focus will be on narratives related to social crises, not economic. The politico-economical dimension of the narrative does not end there, but is subordinated to the discourses on bonds and responsibilities to society as whole or particular communities in such a way that the economical basis of particular policies is not clearly presented. The political dimension is articulated through discourses on engagement in local communities and solidarity between generations³.

The welfare state crisis needs closer examination. Discourse about the welfare crisis started prior to the one about the economic crisis. Narratives of the welfare crisis appeared with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s and indicated the state's ineffectiveness, the superfluity of bureaucracy, and the excessive intervention in the market (see: Rose 2008)⁴. The reforms that started in the 1970s and 1980s did weaken the welfare functions of the state, but did not remove them. Apart from cuts in spending and the privatisation of provisions, there was also a

² See other articles in this volume.

³ These discourses simultaneously refer also to economic domain (pension system stability) but the stress is put on the social and/or civil rights and responsibilities.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the changes in welfare policies and attitudes towards them see: Moran 1988, Andersen, Guillemard, Jensen, Pfau-Effinger 2005, Barr 2010 [2001] Bourdieu 2012, Csoba 2013.

shift in the paradigm of welfare. The change leads to activation instead of protection as a key word in policies. The notions of human capital and social investment appeared in order to name policy subjects and welfare state goals (see: Grewiński 2006, Fehr, 2007, Rose 2008, Du Gay, Scott 2010, Hemerijck 2012). According to Nicholas Barr (2001) it can be said that the welfare state is changing but not vanishing, although the changes are substantial. At the beginning of the economic crisis, the governments of many countries and the EU abided by the anti-welfarists' stipulation that the state should not intervene in markets and some reforms and anti-crisis packages for the protection of the employment were introduced. However, it must be noted that all these acts manifest rather the "right hand" of the state (Bourdieu 2012). Austerity, protection of the work place instead of workers, and the campaign against Greece showed that the welfare state of the 21st Century has a different face than that of Beveridgean and Keynesian as it is pervaded by another kind of political rationality. (Rose 2008)

The idea of the demographic crisis appeared in the World Bank report *Averting Old-Age Crisis* in 1994:

"Systems providing financial security for old age are under increasing strain throughout the world. Rapid demographic transitions caused by rising life expectancy and declining fertility mean that the proportion of old people in the general population is growing rapidly. Extended families and other traditional ways of supporting the old are weakening. Meanwhile, formal systems, such as government-backed pensions, have proved both unsustainable and very difficult to reform. In some developing countries, these systems are nearing collapse. In others, governments preparing to establish formal systems risk repeating expensive mistakes. The result is a looming old age crisis that threatens not only the old but also their children and grandchildren, who must shoulder, directly or indirectly, much of the increasingly heavy burden of providing for the aged." (World Bank, 1994, XIII)

Although the economic background is strong here, there are some other traits that will return in narratives on ageing in the 21st Century: The connection between intergenerational bonds and obligations and the risk of negative changes in marriage patterns and cohabitation. The demographic crisis seems to have all the features of a real threat to the fiscal stability of the state that could even cause "civil disturbances" (see: KS, 2011, 10). A similar way of thinking about economic and demographic interdependence can be observed regarding the 2008 crisis⁵.

The aforementioned three types of crises: economic, welfare state, and demographic do not exhaust the list of crises behind narratives on ageing. However, the latter refers to a more abstract understanding of crises. According to Krzysztof Tyszka (2014, 7) "the notions of "crisis", "decline", "exhaustion", "degeneration" and "collapse" have dominated the discourse on civilisation and the human condition for the last century". From this point of view, recent diagnoses of alienation, decline of social bonds, and individualisation follow those of Marx, Tocqueville, Tönnies, Adorno, and other critics of modernity. Even if one assumes that the

⁵ It does not refer only to the justification of pensions reforms but can be an inversion of the significance of economical and demographic factors : « In my view, the root of the problem [of a Greek crisis] (in addition to the obvious irresponsible spending habits of most government officials) is demographic in nature » (Kownatzki 2010)

crisis of 21st Century society and culture is something different and deeper than utopian nostalgia for the past, the fact is that these narratives existed prior to the 2008 crisis. This raises two questions: Why, assuming that the narratives on the crisis may be the *Zeitgeist* rather than a diagnosis of the contemporary social condition, does this article examine the discourses on ageing as examples of narratives of crisis? Why, in the light of statements about the intersection between various types of crises, is the present financial crisis treated here as a point of reference?

Firstly, the mass protests which followed in the wake of the financial crisis revealed a discontent with the architecture of the state as a political and economic actor that is much deeper than the dissatisfaction with austerity and welfare cuts (see Žižek, 2014). According to Žižek's psychoanalytical way of thinking, it can be said that the almost complete lack of references to the crisis in discourses on ageing "speaks" precisely about the significance of the crisis. However, this statement is not to be understood as a straight inversion (the least discussed becomes the most important factor). The economic crisis was the time when liberal rationalities and their discourses found strong articulation. As researchers (Barbier 2012, Hemerijck 2012) have shown, this type of liberal thinking about social issues has a long history in Europe. The crisis seems to help outweigh the particular combination of the liberal types of rationalities⁶.

What was new in the economic crisis was the domination of a combination of liberal discourses that was different than before. This is also the reason why the financial crisis remains a historical point of reference but not the main axis of the analysis of ageing discourse. Analysis is focussed on the diverse patterns of thinking and tracing the connections between what is discursively articulated, and how, and what is missing. Institutional discourse is not only a statement of state authorities, but a cultural communication of the predictions, hopes, and fears of particular social groups and society. Communication is something more than simply the transmission of a message between sender and receiver⁷. Documents are as valuable as guidebooks, and good practice handbooks, because all of them reveal ways of thinking and dealing with policy problems. For this reason the researched material includes not only programs and other governmental documents, but also examples of so-called good practices that are descriptions of the actions of NGOs and other nongovernmental actors in particular fields. There are reasons for this: the changes in contemporary welfare which shift the realm of reasoning and executing policies outside nation states, the possibility of investigating different rationalities, and ways of thinking about the policies of active ageing in good practice descriptions (however, they were not very different, as the good practices were mostly chosen and described by administrative agencies).

⁶ The question if this type of (neo)liberal thinking about the social and economics was at the same time the reason of the economic crisis is an important one, but is not the subject of this article.

⁷ Including more complicated patterns that stretch the active role of medium and/or receiver.

METHODS AND SUBJECTS OF ANALYSIS

To meet the aims of the research an in-depth content analysis of governmental documents was conducted and supported by analysis of nongovernmental organisations and media communications on active ageing. Because of the theoretical assumptions clarified in the first section of the article, EU and Polish documents were analysed simultaneously. The procedures of both the EU (funding grants and shifting the emphasis of policy implementation to the national and regional levels by NGOs) and Poland (also providing funds for NGOs in line with activities of regional authorities to implement active ageing policy) were arguments for including good practice handbooks in the analysis. The analysis also covered media communications. The aim was not draw a complex map of discourses, but to conduct in-depth analysis of the meaning of “activity” in active ageing discourses. This “activity” turned out to have many meanings in the discourses on ageing and the article presents the summary of the findings.

The aim of the research was in-depth analysis, not a complex study of various cases. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, studies of images of cultural fears do not need to create quasi-statistical maps of the occurrence of a particular phenomenon. Analysis can be compared to looking at a phenomenon through a microscope or tracing the lines of thought for a given policy. Contradictions and correspondences in thinking about crises can be seen in various documents, but they can also occur in just one. Another reason for conducting in-depth analysis of a limited number of cases is that the fears and hopes that undermine governmental and NGO discourse reflect the “feelings” of the whole culture. This is why interpretations of the welfare state or the transformation of governmental rationalities can be inferred from the particular, limited policies or texts about concrete subjects, like active ageing. Finally, in-depth content analysis is a method that corresponds to assumptions that seem to be compatible with an approach to the discourse that puts emphasis on the moments when problems emerge and the ways of thinking about social phenomena as problems that are socially rooted⁸. For this approach it is not important how many of the documents, texts, etc. repeat the narratives, but the very fact that a particular definition of a problem occurs at all.

The second reason for the in-depth content analysis of a limited number of documents was the limitations of the length of articles and the necessity to limit the quantity of documents produced in the EU to a number that can be analysed by one person.

The three types of research material were not treated equally. The focus was put on government documents and collections of good practices promoted by them and projects conducted by the biggest NGOs. Less attention was paid to media communiques (only Polish). These were chosen according to the subject and treated as examples more than independent messages due to the assumption that the media where references to active ageing occurred occupy a similar position to NGOs in the social field. The subjects of NGO projects⁹

⁸ For the original conceptualisation of the notion see : Foucault 2001, 1488.

⁹ See for example projects of Towarzystwo Inicjatyw Twórczych E, or raport on UTW (Third Age Univeristies) (available on : <http://zoomnautw.pl/wyniki-badania/>, 19.08.2015)

are most likely to be in the same group that uses the analysed kinds of media, i.e. internet pages and newspapers such as *Newsweek* and *Wyborcza*. Only Polish Radio's 1 Programme seems more likely to have a more class diversified audience (See: Warczok 2008). All of these discourses (governmental, NGO's, media) are treated here as narratives, that is as a methods of communication.

It is a fact that the narratives on pensions and the general fiscal dimension of ageing policies are directly connected with the narratives on the economic and demographic crisis. The connections between the political and economical dimensions of ageing policies and narratives are already well established in the literature (See: Oręziak 2014, Guillemard 1986). Active ageing has been investigated from the perspective of active policies which shape their subjects (Biggs, Powell 2001), the acceptability of the coherence between political visions, the experiences of older people (Schönbrodt and Veil 2012, Szatur-Jaworska 2012), and the changing relations between the state and the elderly as a social group (see: Guillemard, 1986). Nevertheless, there is a need for critical investigation of active ageing narratives from a cultural perspective that does not link it directly to the subjectifying power of the state or the neoliberal turn in fiscal policies¹⁰. Instead, this interpretation stresses the cultural dimension of institutional discourse because of the assumption that the “myths” that underlie the narratives of economic and demographic crises may be the very same as those relating to the social crisis.

This leads to the issue of the key words of these narratives, most of which (responsibility, rationality, privatisation of risks, and activity) are well known thanks to the works of Beck, Rose, and others. Special attention is devoted in the article to activity discourses as a policy paradigm and social phenomenon. In other words, what they “say” about contemporary society's images of its own and its post-crisis future (or maybe a “bigger” crisis will unfold in the future).

ACTIVE AGEING: HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

Active ageing is not an exclusively European policy concept. It is widely used in the supranational agencies (OECD, WHO, UN) and at national level politics from Sweden through the Czech Republic to Singapore (Hasmankova Mahrnkova 2011, Brooke 2014). The term was first used in gerontology and entered the political domain through WHO documents, according to which active ageing is “the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age”. (WHO/NMH/NMPH/02.8) The European Union adopted this notion to construct the Active Ageing Index (AAI) measurement tool: “Active ageing refers to the situation where people continue to participate in the formal labour market as well as engage in other unpaid productive activities (such as care provision to family members and volunteering) and live healthy, independent and secure lives as they age.” (Zaidi, 2013: 6) However, references to

¹⁰ Apart from the analyses that concentrate on more “practical” dimensions of ageing policies or researches that are designed to seek a way to improve their efficiency.

this term already existed at the beginning of the 20th century and ageing has been recognised by the EU since the 1980s.

Jurek (2011) described three stages in the institutionalisation of ageing policies in the EU. The first stage, which lasted until 1992, involved identifying the problem of demographic ageing in the EU and diagnosis of its consequences. The second stage, from 1993 to 1998, involved conceptualising the politics of ageing. The third and last stage, which started in 1999, concerned the implementation and development of European ageing policies. (ibid.: 58) In the same year active ageing became the paradigm of EU ageing policies. (ibid.: 61)

The AGE Platform Europe, which associates national and regional seniors' organisations from all Europe¹¹, was established in 2001. Since then the European Commission and other agencies have released a large number of documents, communiqués and reports on this issue. Twelve years later in 2012 the European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations and AAI was announced. Also, AAI EU also launched other programmes related to ageing society. One of these was The Ambient Assisted Living Joint Programme (AAL), which was relaunched in 2013 as The Active and Assisted Living Joint Programme 2013-2020 (AAL JP). It “supports applied research on innovative ICT-enhanced services for ageing well, with a time to market of 1 to 3 years. The AAL JP is driven by Member States and supported by the European Commission, to enhance EU competitiveness and tackle the ageing challenge”¹², for example by supporting the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing (partnership on research and innovations)¹³.

In Polish policies the notion of active ageing appeared in the 2005-2008 Krajowy Program na rzecz implementacji Strategii Lizbońskiej (National Reform Programme for 2005-2008 to implement the Lisbon Strategy), with which the government committed to implement an active ageing policy. In earlier documents the problem of ageing was absent or barely mentioned in the Long-term Strategy for Poland's Sustainable Development 2025 (2000) and The National Development Strategy 2007-2013. This rather neutral attitude to ageing has changed since 2007 and ageing has become a factor which influences policies and even transforms the role of the state (National Development Strategy 2007-2015). Since 2007, National Strategies and their implementations have devoted more attention to ageing. In 2008, the government launched the “Solidarity Between Generations Program. Actions to Increase Professional Activity of People over 50”. The notion of the silver economy was introduced in the Poland 2030 Strategy: The Second Wave of Modernity (2013: 28). Population ageing is seen as challenge in all these strategies, however the scope and ways of dealing with it are expanding and becoming more complex.

Documents concerning active ageing have been created since 2012: The Government Programme for Social Activity of Older Persons (ASOS) 2012-2013 and ASOS 2014-2015.

¹¹ <http://www.age-platform.eu/about-age>, 10.06.2015.

¹² <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/active-assisted-living-joint-programme-aal-jp> (10.06.2015)

¹³ http://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-union/index_en.cfm?section=active-healthy-ageing&pg=about (10.06.2015)

The Senior Policy Guidelines (ZDPS) from 2014 is a fulfilment of the ASOS 2012 guidelines for establishing a long-term ageing policy. The aim of the senior policy is to support and provide possibilities (capacities) for active and healthy ageing and capabilities to continue independent and satisfying living even in cases of functional limitations. (ZDPS: 6) This definition corresponds with those of the EU on active ageing.

Corresponding to the EU policy, increased attention to ageing and implementation of the concept of active ageing in Poland can be seen. Poland joined the EU in 2004, having started to prepare for this from the very beginning of the political transformation in 1989. This can be seen in the level of language used in consecutive strategies and programmes as terms like “cohesion”, “human capital”, and “know-how” were transformed and adopted. However, bearing in mind Sassen's (2007) insights about the relation between state policies and supranational organisations, the similarities between national and UE political terms cannot be interpreted as plain imitation. EU policies are constructed in a way that allows (and reinforces) states' particularities, for instance through an instrument called the Open Coordination Method (OCM)¹⁴. On the other hand, emphasis on good practices and cohesion policy acts as a unifying tool at the level of the whole Union. In order to draw conclusions on the scale of unification of the policies, an in-depth analysis needs to be conducted of the policies of several EU nation states. It can be assumed that even the good practices, that are the implementations of policies that align with EU goals and are successful in attaining them differ according to specific countries.

CRISES IN THE NARRATIVES ON ACTIVE AGEING

In the discourses about active ageing, every positive phenomenon or characteristic is implicitly followed by its opposite. For instance, in pair activity/passivity the stress put on activity reveals the places where passive attitudes dominate. In this sense policies are creative: they aim to achieve some goal which is not (or only partially) yet achieved. This is a key principle of AAI as this index uses only positive values. Moreover, the position in the index relates as much to the ideal condition (100) as to the actual, relative state of affairs. This means that there is no definite goal as the best score on the scale is always relative and it depends on the performance of the best country at that time. A score of 100 on the scale is an ideal utopian point (Zaidi 2013: 16) that cannot be achieved. Instead, the AAI is reflexive in the sense that it is sensitive to changes. The crucial point here is that the AAI seems to presuppose that there will be some (unpredictable) changes that can affect the ageing process at the level of individuals and the population. This finding leads to a significant feature of the ideal type of policy subjects that can be found in the AAI and other EU documents. This trait can be called reflexivity in Beck's sense.

In order to perform well, individuals and institutions should have the capability to react appropriately to various events. It seems that there can be two kinds of mercurial events: structural (changes are part of the systemic logic, for example unpredictability is typical for a

¹⁴ For an analysis of the OCM in EU politics, see: Walters, Haahr 2011 [2005].

market), and external, that cannot be deduced from the structure of an institution. These events can be seen as a risk as there is no way to predict them before they happen, however this does not mean that they are always negative. The documents show that unexpected events are rather perceived in discourse as something normal and natural which is not valued morally in terms of good and bad. The constant risk of unpredictability compels social actors to be reflexive (“flexible” and “adaptable” (Zaidi 2013: 65)¹⁵.

Other traits that seem to correspond with the type of citizen who can cope with the fluidity and risk of life are the ability to learn and self-reliance (autonomy). These features correspond with the activation policy paradigm included in the Active Social Policy, which is a policy paradigm or a set of rules that operates in a specific welfare regime. In a regime, policy is not only driven by “classical” welfare goals: participation instead of social security, work redistribution instead of social transfers, and employer as work-giver instead of employee/citizen. (Rymsza 2007: 47) Key terms here such as empowerment, self-esteem, and self-reliance, are oriented to the individual. The state provides only opportunities and security for the unhindered activity of citizens. Attributes such as gender and class are neglected in the discourses or are not mentioned and it is assumed that every person has equal capability to learn new skills, therefore it is concluded that everyone has equal opportunities in society. The second aspect of this assumption about citizens’ equal opportunities¹⁶ and ability to learn is the moral valorisation of their own social position¹⁷. These characteristics can be summarised as a vision of policy's subjects as “holder” of a human capital (see: Fehr 2007).

The transformation towards activity and self-responsibility has also occurred in the discourses about ageing. A number of researchers (Szatur-Jaworska, Schönbrodt and Veil, Biggs and Powell 2001, Van Dyk *et al.* 2014, Brooke 2014, Hasmanová Marhánková 2011) have seen this as significant trait of narratives about active ageing. Most of them agree that the leading paradigm is neoliberalism. Policy subjects are seen in the documents about ageing as responsible, rational, and self-managing. At the same time, responsibility for individuals’ health, social and material situations is transferred to them and morally judged. As in the case of active social policy discourse, ethical judgement refers to individual moral capacities such as idleness and lack of responsibility. Moreover, there is also a reference to responsibility to society (the burden of pensions and healthcare for the “irresponsible” and “passive” elderly lies on the state and society).

All these characteristics seem to suggest that the welfare state crisis is real and is exacerbated by the economic crisis (pension reforms toward individualisation and privatisation of insurance). The state is retreating from the protection and management of citizens’ lives, and the three-stage life course is being replaced by flexible and individualised “do-it-yourself biographies” (see: Guillemard, 2005). This uncertainty can be managed in two ways that, according to Guillemard, could lead to a transformation of the welfare state. The first, called

¹⁵ cf. ZDPS

¹⁶ The sociological variant of this belief is statement about death of the classes.

¹⁷ See, for example, the works of : Rose 2008, Cruikshank 1996, Zalewska 2001, and Beck's concept of the “Do-it-yourself-biography” (Beck 2002).

asset-based welfare, leads to individualisation of life patterns and greater personal responsibility for security and privatisation of risk, but with institutional financing of entitlements.

The second, transitional labour markets or “social drawing rights”, combine public financing with shared responsibility (ibid., 71). They “emphasise collective regulations and their coordination by the main actors, especially the state”. In this model, individuals are not left to themselves in the labour market and a network of actors and programmes is the key to making personal trajectories more secure.” (Ibid., 69). Nevertheless, both ways of transforming welfare concentrate on employment, so pensions and patterns of retirement appeared to be problematic. As Guillemard indicated in her article (ibid., 57), the three-stage order of life (school, work, retirement) is transforming into flexible lifelong interweaving of periods of working and unemployment. Again, the key word in welfare state projects is activity. According to life patterns and ageing narratives, being active means working longer (as long as possible) and committing as a volunteer for the local community. There is a temptation to interpret the significance of activity and employment in old age as an implicit message about the future of pension systems, namely the disappearance of state pensions and retirement as a distinct period of life.

However, “activity” in active ageing discourses refers to a broader scope of actions than those connected with the labour market, even if they concern retirement and pensions. Far from diagnosing contemporary culture as being in real crisis, the narratives on active ageing can be interpreted as revealing a particular vision of social structure. According to this vision, class and gender inequalities are not important factors which influence social position. However, a feeling of uncertainty can be found in the discourses on active ageing. This uncertainty about the actual state of society and how it will change¹⁸ can be interpreted as a feeling of anxiety which reaches the ontological aspect of social life. Individualisation, which seems to be strengthened by discourses on active ageing, is at the same time and in the same narratives seen as having a negative influence on social bonds that must be overcome. The intergenerational initiatives that are an important part of the policies and initiatives can be seen as an example of fighting the negative aspects of individualisation.

However, it is more important for the analysis of discourses on active ageing that the “fight” is not a conscious one and has a modest aim: to better cope with the actual situation, not to prevent cultural change¹⁹. In other words, the striving against cultural individualisation is

¹⁸ For a discussion on transformations of social bonds and new possible arrangements of social actors see: Marody 2014, for the role of state and communities in this process see: Lessenich 2011.

¹⁹ Exemplary here is *Pari Solidaire* (<http://www.leparisolidaire.fr/wp/>, 30.08.2015) cohabitation initiative that connects young tenants looking for a room in Paris with elderly - and lonely - landlords. It is significant for most of the NGO's and associations working with the elderly in the « activity » paradigm that they conjoin elements of the discourses from different, contradictory domains such as moral and/or emotional values with an attempt at rational, legitimised arrangements that are characteristic for more economical thinking: “Il ne s'agit pas d'une simple mise en relation de nos adhérents par croisement de fichiers. De la précision de la sélection des candidats dépend le succès d'une cohabitation harmonieuse. **Un service personnalisé** Le Pari Solidaire s'engage dans une démarche individualisée. Chacun de nos adhérents est unique et sa demande est motivée par sa réalité, ses besoins, ses désirs et ses capacités. **Une charte de convivialité** Le Pari Solidaire propose à ses membres de

made on the terms and conditions of individualised institutions and subjects. The intention of the initiatives and projects contained in good practice handbooks or promoted on NGO²⁰ sites is not to make a new community of strong bonds and identification, but to create an association of individualised subjects:

“SILVERGAME is an innovative multimedia platform, which is to host a variety of game-based applications, community features and web-based services specifically designed to cater to the needs of elderly people. The project focuses on activities like singing, dancing and driving to activate senior citizens and encourage social interaction among them.” (AALCatalogue: 55)

“AGNES will start by providing a basic ICT platform to create and maintain an easy-to-use web-based social network for individual elderly persons. This platform will be used to stimulate the elderly person. Timely information will be passed to the network on the activities and subjective state of the elderly person (e.g. presence, state of wellness, etc) allowing for a much better-tailored and timely response, attention and care so as to improve and maintain the well-being and independence of the elderly living in their own homes and reduce healthcare costs. The project will address chronic conditions such as mild cognitive impairment, and develop and test solutions to alleviate and/or prevent them. Informal carers, friends and family members will have greater access to information about the person, and those at a distance will be enabled to keep in touch and share activities with their elderly family member or friend, and to know their current condition. (ibid.)

This “language” makes it indirectly less visible and unpredictable. Is it a counter-discourse that has the potential for transformation into another type of collectivism, or is it just another face of atomisation and individualisation? What can already be seen is that the narratives reveal a particular vision rather than prescriptions for the future. In this vision, where cultural individualisation outstrips structural individualisation, social subjects are monadological beings not because of their choices, but because of external factors.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis showed that the economic crisis influenced the discourses about active ageing, especially those devoted to pension schemes. Subsequently, the activity paradigm corresponds with transformations of the welfare state that seem to favour a neoliberal type of state. However, the cultural analysis of various discourses allowed for their more abstract interpretation, which may be treated not as true or false images, nor as ideological propaganda, but as cultural images of (not always) discursively articulated fears and hopes. In

prendre connaissance et d’adhérer à sa Charte en la signant. **Un suivi régulier auprès de chaque adhérent** Le Pari Solidaire prolonge tout au long de l’année son action et son accompagnement auprès de ses membres dans le respect de la Charte.” (Bold PS, <http://www.leparisolidaire.fr/wp/lassociation/>, 30.08.2015)

²⁰ See: <http://www.bochnia.kolping.pl/strefa-aktywnosci-seniora.html>, <http://seniorzywalcji.pl/?a=385>, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_VPSyhENaQ&feature=youtu.be

this sense they are a way of social communication. The question is if they are class limited. The research material can be defined as (almost) class monolithic. Nevertheless, policies do have an impact on all social classes (apart from the fact that the character of this impact varies according to social position).

Moreover, individualism as a cultural phenomenon (see: Jacyno 2007) transverses all classes. Thus, the question is not if individualisation, the image of lonely ageing, is typical for a particular class or social group, but if there are other contradictory discourses that are driven by different images of the social sphere. There is still a need for research in this field and analysis of other kinds of media and ways of communication that have been abandoned by the dominant classes.

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