

Politically correct eroticism

An anthropologist looks at the argument for a rewarding sex life in old age

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With the increase in longevity, old age is becoming the longest phase of life. Generally considered to begin at age 60 (but not infrequently at 50), this period can amount to nearly half of a person's existence. Now, there is no such thing as only one period of old

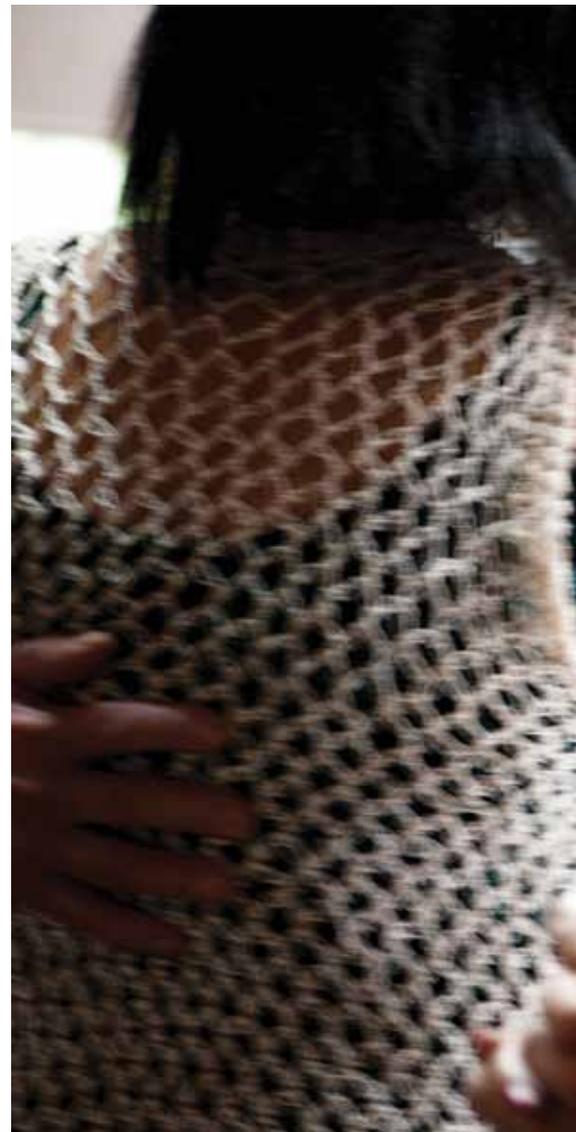
age; rather, there are several periods of old age depending on the age group and the elderly person's social environmental and individual circumstances. Because longer life expectancy is a sudden recent phenomenon, public policies, medical ideas, and common sense concepts about aging are many and varied, and they intertwine and often overlap.

Changes and contradictions in gerontological arguments in recent decades are the subject of the study titled *Aging, Violence and Sexuality* by Professor Guíta Grin Debert of the Anthropology Department at the University of Campinas (Unicamp). The work is part of a series of studies that Grin Debert has conducted throughout her academic career. The



latest findings are in the field of sexuality or, more precisely, “the eroticization of old age” observed in recent decades. The study was based on an analysis of documents and official statements, articles published in the press and self-help literature, as well as ethnographic data obtained at venues where older people socialize. What we observe, says

Grin Debert, is a marked change from the 1970s. We have moved away from a notion of old age characterized as a period of “physical decay and the loss of social roles,” in which sexual activity virtually disappears, to a different understanding in which an active and rewarding sex life is a prerequisite for a healthy and happy life.



In this way, the idea that sex “is almost an obligation” for the elderly has begun to predominate. Borrowing an expression coined by sociologist Maria Filomena Gregori, this is what the researcher calls “politically correct eroticism.” Not surprisingly, in discussions about old age, physicians are losing ground to psychologists.

“Old age has become the age of leisure and personal fulfillment,” says Grin Debert. This notion, which is not limited to Brazil, directly influences definitions of old age and the parameters of the “management of aging.” “Also, this is still a new market because, of all the social groups, the elderly are the biggest spenders,” she says.

The myth of asexual old age has been debunked in many areas. Studies in several areas have shown that sexual ac-

tivity does not end as the years go by. Although there is clearly a decline in the frequency of sexual relations, there is also a perception that the quality of these relations may improve. Encounters can become freer, with more affection. In this regard, it is observed that traditional gender roles tend to reverse: women become less reserved, and men become more affectionate. Moreover, it seems that sensations change. Pleasure appears to spread all over the body, and a process of “degenitalization” occurs.

In 2008, psychiatrist and sexologist Carmita Abdo, in the Sexuality Project (Pro-Sex) at Hospital das Clínicas of the University of São Paulo, coordinated Mosaic Brazil, a comprehensive study on Brazilian sexuality. The results showed that sexual activity continues in

old age, but not without setbacks. “The advent of menopause in women, with the end of hormone production, has a great physical and psychological impact, especially in a country in which great importance is placed on both beauty and vitality,” says Abdo. In men, fertility continues, but beginning with the fifth decade of life, there is a growing incidence of health issues that impair sexual potency.

However, desire persists. “The sexual repertoire changes with age. It becomes toned down due to limitations of physical mobility,” says the sexologist. “The act is faster than in the past, but the affection continues for some time after. The more involved a couple is, the greater the pleasure.” Extramarital relations are also on the rise in men and women, often with younger partners.



Therefore, “unhurried sex” seems to be the hallmark of this stage of life. However, the emergence of drugs that address erectile dysfunction makes it necessary to modify the discussion that is underway. “The triumph of the emphasis on gains in old age, even though they may have overshadowed the need for attention to physical losses, has made a positive contribution to breaking down prejudices and has brought about an acceptance of diversity related to age,” says Grin Debert. According to Abdo, the idea that an active sex life promotes good health is accurate, albeit indirectly, through the satisfaction it brings.

In an apparent paradox, the new configuration of our understanding of old age has even liberated women from the “requirements” of a regular sex life that are characteristic of marital relations.

Many elderly women who are widows, unmarried, or separated or whose husbands suffer from disabling diseases attend dances for seniors. This phenomenon has been studied separately by anthropologists Mirian Goldenberg of the Department of Cultural Anthropology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and Andrea Moraes Alves from the School of Social Work at the same institution. Both scholars identified an ongoing investment in the sexuality of the body. Vanity and beauty treatments persist, but they are not linked to the exercise of seduction. On the contrary, they are now accompanied by freedom: the freedom to refrain from having sex.

This is what Goldenberg defines as the replacement of “I Need” (to be a mother, a wife, or a lover) with “I want” (fun, pleasure, and friendship with other women).

The dance partner is usually younger but is not necessarily a sexual partner. For many analysts, including Grin Debert, Abdo, and Moraes Alves herself, this abstinence also reveals the burden of conservative morality “linked to the stereotype of the woman who must obey,” in the words of Moraes Alves. Nonetheless, Goldenberg stresses that the people who go to these dances resist “the images of a body that has aged.” She notes one revealing feature in her research: the only social group that disagrees with the widely held idea that men age better is women over the age of 60.

The research conducted by Goldenberg, which was the source of the recent book entitled *A bela velhice* (Beautiful Old Age), published by Record, shows that when women reach old age, they feel inclined to distance themselves from



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a family life that takes more than it gives, whereas men, after years dedicated to business obligations, are looking for a welcoming family that is new and rewarding. Professionally, there is also a contrast between the genders. “While older men find fulfillment in new studies and new work, both of which are more about pleasure than financial gain, women seek to do only the things that they enjoy, usually in the area of socialization and reciprocity,” says Goldenberg. Grin Debert perceives a similar phenomenon: women seek friendship with other women, and men engage in activities with other men, such as retirees’ associations.

According to Grin Debert, the hallmark of gerontology ideas of the 1970s was that retirement is a social status symbol of the elderly, and this idea was used “to sensitize the government and society to the importance of studies and activities to make aging successful.” Grin Debert notes, however, that no emphasis on a negative view of old age was found in the research, and most elderly people themselves agree. Even more so today, many people say that their golden years are the best phase of their lives, as evidenced by the accounts collected by Goldenberg. The accounts

of the elderly who attend universities and join other groups for seniors reveal an optimism that is inconsistent with the idea of a phase of life marked by decline.

Such associations, including those established by government entities such as the federal government’s Office of Human Rights, rail against official arguments that hold the welfare systems for the elderly responsible for government overspending. “Fighting prejudices toward aging routinely showed that those in the group remained lucid and knew how to criticize governments, politicians and the media’s misinterpretations of all the different aspects of Brazilian social life,” Grin Debert wrote in the article titled *Frontiers of Gender and Sexuality in Old Age*. “Many of the associations were critical of programs for ‘seniors’, which some called the ‘playground of the elderly’, for diverting the attention of retirees from their real interests.”

The disconnect between perceptions of aging in hegemonic arguments, on the one hand, and the experience of the elderly themselves, on the other hand, also prevails in the area of sexuality. The “official” version considers eroticism in old age from the standpoint of holding on to youth. “I have no intention of promoting bodies that have aged from the aes-

thetic point of view,” says Grin Debert. The new myth of a happy old age with eroticism is also paying dividends. In elderly women, anthropologist Moraes Alves detects different “strategies” for how to deal with their own bodies. One strategy is to constantly “negotiate” the boundaries of rejuvenation. On the one hand, women invest in plastic surgery, cosmetics, and clothing to prolong a youthful appearance. On the other hand, they remain vigilant (and tense) so that they do not run the risk of appearing to be “ridiculous and vulgar old ladies.” Yet there are a few women who, even in the early years of old age, deal with the taboo of gray hair without resorting to the dye that is “so universal in Brazil.” ■

Project

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