

Age-Ism: Another Form of Bigotry

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MALCOLM X, the Kerner Commission Report, and a variety of other persons, events, and materials have made the concept of racism familiar. Social class discrimination also needs no introduction. However, we may soon have to consider very seriously a form of bigotry we now tend to overlook: age discrimination or age-ism, prejudice by one age group toward other age groups. If such bias exists, might it not be especially evident in America; a society that has traditionally valued pragmatism, action, power, and the vigor of youth over contemplation, reflection, experience, and the wisdom of age?

In the affluent community of Chevy Chase, recent events have revealed a complex interweaving of class, color, and age discrimination that may highlight the impact of these forces in our national life.

On January 30, 1969, the National Capital Housing Authority, the public housing agency of the District of Columbia, held hearings on its proposal to purchase Regency House, a high-rise apartment building in Chevy Chase, for the elderly poor. If finally approved, Regency House would be the first public housing project west of Rock Creek Park, the traditional boundary between black and white in Washington, D.C.

The middle-class and middle-aged white citizenry of Chevy Chase appeared at both the hearings and at the Chevy Chase Citizens' Association meeting at a local public school on February 17. They vigorously protested on a variety of grounds the National Capital Housing Authority proposal. Some of these aroused citizens demonstrated that they could practice the politics of protest and confrontation in a manner as impassioned as that of the young and alienated.

Chevy Chase residents were irritated and angered by a proposal to provide what they considered luxury housing (there is a swimming pool

on the roof of Regency House) for older people who were not accustomed to "luxury."

Among statements heard at the meetings and quoted in the local newspapers were: "You would open the door for people who don't know how to live." "Slums are made by the people who live in them." "It (public housing) has to come sometime but not this time or in this place." "I am not against old folks, believe me." "Who wants all those old people around." Zoning, tax losses, costs, and property values were also mentioned, but it was clear that more than concern over the pocketbook was operating.

Class, color, and age have always been parts of the structure of American communities. Since the passage of the Public Housing Act of 1937, we have tended to increase the divisions within America by separating the poor and segregating the non-white. Today, despite Social Security, the elderly poor are common, and they are frequently black. There has also been a trend in recent years toward segregation of the middle-class elderly in "retirement communities" and "housing for the elderly."

Neighborhood reaction against the use of Regency House for the elderly poor carries implications beyond Chevy Chase. The classic or scapegoat explanation for prejudice turns upon the unconscious effort to justify one's own weaknesses by finding them in others—in other races, religious, or nationalities. Personal insecurity, once generalized, becomes the basis of prejudice and hostility.

Age-ism describes the subjective experience implied in the popular notion of the generation gap. Prejudice of the middle-aged against the old in this instance, and against the young in others, is a serious national problem. Age-ism reflects a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged—a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, "uselessness," and death.

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Cultural attitudes in our society reinforce these feelings. We have chosen mandatory retirement from the work force and thus removed the elderly from the mainstream of life. Age-ism is manifested in the taunting remarks about "old fogeys," in the special vulnerability of the elderly to muggings and robberies, in age discrimination in employment independent of individual competence, and in the probable inequities in the allocation of research funds. Although persons 65 years of age and over account for 25% of all public mental hospital admissions, only 3% of the research budget of the National Institute of Mental Health is spent in relevant research. Less than 1% of the budget of the entire National Institutes of Health is devoted to the study of aging phenomena.

The issue goes deeper. It is the middle-aged, after all, upon whom the "burdens imposed" by both ends of the life cycle, the young and the old, necessarily fall. From their purses come hard-won earnings to educate the young and to care for the elderly (in our time collectively, although inadequately, through Medicare and Social Security). Middle life has been labeled the period of "gravity" because of its manifold responsibilities. It is not surprising that some members of the middle group "cop out" of marriages, of jobs, even of society while others rigidly and tenaciously hold on to what they have struggled so hard to achieve. Many middle-aged people, of course, respond flexibly and creatively to both young and old.

Age-ism is also seen in other groups. The young may not trust anyone over 30; but those over 30 may not trust anyone younger. The Walker Commission report has described how young people were beaten-up in the "police riot" in Chicago during the Democratic Convention. These attacks have been viewed as class-determined (lower-class police punishing middle-class children) and the age factor has been minimized. Yet future historians may find in the political year 1968 the elements of a counter-revolution by the middle-aged against both the young and the old.

Many different objections were raised to the National Capital Housing Authority proposal for housing the elderly poor in Chevy Chase. Color and class were surely most significant, yet racism alone cannot account for the "middle-aged riot"—for screeching, shouting, booing, and stomping of feet that occurred at the hearings and the citizens' meeting. A local official noted that the same arguments against public housing had been

heard from middle-class Negro families in the Northeast, a predominantly black section of Washington.

The proposed purchase of the nine-story 172-unit apartment building gave rise to an extraordinary amount of misinformation. In the first place, Regency House is not particularly luxurious. The National Capital Housing Authority now houses about 1600 elderly individuals or couples, and over the last two years, has spent \$8.3 million to buy three high-rise apartment houses that had been privately constructed and rented. These buildings, all less than 5 years old, contain more than 600 apartments and are well equipped with air conditioning, off-street parking, garbage disposals, and swimming pools. A swimming pool, so offensive to the affluent Northwest Washingtonians who objected to the Regency House proposal, could be beneficial for the health and recreation of older people.

Second, contrary to the apparent fears that only elderly Negroes on welfare could occupy Regency House, NCHA housing is for low-income elderly and not just for welfare or black elderly. The maximum annual income that an elderly person may have to live in NCHA housing is \$3,300 for an individual and \$4,300 for a couple. Retired school teachers, railroad employees and others, both black and white, would seek to live in Regency House and indeed these groups make up 10% of the 1,200 persons who have been on NCHA housing waiting lists for an average of 2 years. Tenants at Regency House would have to pay \$50 per month for an efficiency and \$55 per month for a one-bedroom apartment. Preference is given to veterans and to those evicted by urban renewal.

Some opponents of the Regency House proposal expressed fear that families with children would eventually move in, although the apartment house contains only efficiencies and one-bedroom apartments.

Others considered that "these people" were undeserving and should have been more provident. Yet the stereotype of the undeserving poor seems curiously outmoded. Many of "these people" were at the height of their earning power and productive years during the Depression when income and the possibility of saving were minimal. With inflation spiraling at a rate of 4 to 6%, it has been difficult for people of all ages living on fixed incomes to save, irrespective of prudence. Despite a 13% across-the-board increase in Social Security benefits in January, 1967, more people

have fallen below the poverty line because of inflation than have risen above it. Fortunately, consideration is now being given to including escalator clauses in Social Security to provide for cost of living increases.

Other opponents of the Regency House proposal misunderstood the financial basis of the plan. They feared that monies for the purchase of this building would come out of their own pockets through local taxes. The costs actually do come out of their pockets in part, but through the federal Internal Revenue receipts that provide for partial subsidies for public housing throughout the country.

Still another point in the opposition was that "these people" would have a higher cost of living in Chevy Chase than elsewhere. Actually there has been some evidence that living costs are higher in Washington's ghetto areas.

Among the positive features of the area is the location of Regency House close to conveniences useful to older people: drug stores, reasonably priced restaurants, cafeterias, and supermarkets. A community center, a library, and public transportation are also nearby.

Prior to the selection of Regency House, the National Capital Housing Authority had to study carefully the 200 apartment buildings it has been offered to determine soundness of construction, proper location, and appropriate price. Under an executive order from President Johnson, National Capital Housing Authority is required to space public housing throughout the city of Washington. If National Capital Housing Authority had not selected Regency House, it would have chosen some other apartment building in a comparable area of Northwest Washington.

Commissioner Walter E. Washington approved the purchase on March 6 and the Department of Housing and Urban Development gave its approval. There was talk among the middle-aged opponents of legal action against the decision. One stated ground was that public monies should not be used to enforce social policies.

H. G. Wells once said that history is a race between education and catastrophe. The NCHA might have mitigated the storm of controversy and, more important, facilitated the reception of the elderly poor into Chevy Chase through an educational campaign with the assistance of the press (both the *Washington Post* and the *Star* have support the NCHA), and various interested groups and individuals within and without the community. Many groups testified in favor of

Regency House, including the Northwest Washington Fair Housing Association. City-wide organizations, such as the League of Women Voters and the D.C. Democratic Central Committee have supported the proposal. However, there was a large measure of good will within the community that was not mobilized.

The experience of other housing for the elderly sponsored by NCHA could have been reported and potential residents themselves asked to participate in neighborhood meetings. Chevy Chase residents, imprisoned in such myths as "deterioration," could have been invited to visit other NCHA housing.

Such a program would have been political education in the very best sense. Perhaps the same number of Chevy Chase residents would have objected; but their protests would have been drowned out by a better informed, articulate majority. Moreover, both the youth and the middle-aged of the area would have learned something about themselves, including the implacable course of their own aging.

To explore the bigotry in age-ism is not to minimize the other more salient features of racial and class discrimination observed in Chevy Chase. But aging is the great sleeper in American life. By the year 2000, according to current population projections, there will be approximately 33 million retired people each with an average of 25 years of retirement time. Should there be major breakthroughs in finding deterrents to aging along with the present steady pace of medical progress, there would be still greater numbers of old and retired people. How are they (that is, we) to be supported: What are they (we) to do? The Beatles sing:

"Will you still need me,
Will you still feed me,
When I'm sixty-four.
You'll be older, too. . ."

Chevy Chase residents, like Americans in general, are unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge the poverty of the elderly. George Santayana said that, but for the excellence of the typical single life in a society, no nation deserves to be remembered more than the sands of the sea. If it may be said that the quality of a culture can be measured by its regard for its least powerful members, for example, its care for the elderly and its protection and education of its children, the readings for ours are disappointingly low.

Social Security and Medicare, which most Americans consider landmarks in social legisla-

tion, are little more than sops to the conscience. The average income of the person over 65 in America is \$1,800 per year. Nearly 7 million of our 19 million elderly are below the poverty line. The average monthly Social Security check of a retired male worker in America today is \$86.04. Since Medicare pays an average of only 35% of medical bills, it has thus far failed to provide adequate financial support for the health care of the elderly. Medicare, Social Security, and public housing are examples of tokenism. They are not fundamentally meeting human needs for health care, income, and housing.

In the District of Columbia there are 73,000 people of age 65 and above. The immediate area of Regency House has a heavy concentration of older people (and four old age homes) but in Washington, as in other cities, the elderly tend to be locked in older, slum-ridden areas. Many elderly, for example, live in Washington's Model Cities area, which includes the Shaw section. Much of the public housing in the District has been built in the Anacostia area across the river.

Ironically, one could question the wisdom of concentrating old people in specific housing. Sweden, for example, has been giving up high-rise enclaves for its older citizens. Rather than a housing program for older citizens, it might be more desirable socially to provide rent supplements or, ultimately, appropriate income maintenance so that the elderly could live anywhere throughout the city. Of course, some older people do want to live together and coordinated services

—medical, social, and recreational—can be placed in housing for the elderly. For those with increasing limitation, congregate living with available services is mandatory. Thus, it is probably wisest for a society to provide a range of alternatives. One of the greatest losses of old age is that of choice.

One thing is certain: further concentration of public housing in limited sections of any city—concentrating the poor or the rich or the black or the old or the young—only contribute to the divisiveness of our society, particularly the separation into two societies described in the Kerner Report.

I do not want my children to grow up in an isolated neighborhood, knowing neither the realities of old age nor the meaning of racial heterogeneity. Age, race and social class discrimination are clearly inimical to the developing human community and to the extent that our community of Chevy Chase is "closed," it is inherently disadvantaged.

Age-ism might parallel (it might be wishful thinking to say replace) racism as the great issue of the next 20 to 30 years and age bigotry is seen within minority groups themselves.

Seventeen per cent of our electorate is over 65 already, but at present it is not voting as a group; consequently politicians are not zealously seeking the votes of older citizens. Yet this may well change; perhaps one day we will be hearing of Senior Power. We don't all grow white or black, but we all grow old.

Octogenarians of the World, Unite!

After all the snide cracks that the years have seen made at the expense of little old ladies and their tut-tutting Victorian ways, it was marvellous, this week, to find one little old lady turning the usual tables. One's heard of the little old lady who makes sure that nothing gets into *Reader's Digest* that isn't clean and proper, of Henry Jame's little old lady in Dubuque who was the only reader that the booksellers cared about, of the little old ladies of Cheltenham whom moral campaigners like Sir Cyril Osborne are always so keen to protect, but what price the Little Old Lady Of Richmond? When 20 stout fellows of the National Front broke into a Richmond theatre in an attempt to disrupt a play, they considered immoral, corrupt, and dangerous, they were turned on by an 80-year-old darling who bunched her fists and drove the whole lousy lot of them out of the building. The play being *Staircase*, a fine and sensitive item with a homosexual theme, the whole incident only bears out what we've believed for years, viz. that all those other old ladies were just figments of the bigoted imaginations prepared to use them to serve their own ends. It's clearly not the *real* little old ladies we have to worry about, but the quacking members of the National Front who are the real threats to free expression, and don't let anyone forget it.

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