

# The moral economy of the third age

## Why governments encouraging productivity in old age are unpopular



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Old age increasingly takes on the character of a problem again. However, we will still see tensions in society and in policy making for decades because of the positive images and moral ideas surrounding the third age.

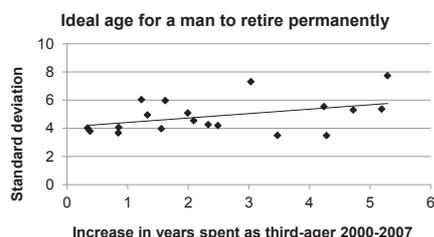
### Key concepts

- Moral ideas: tell us which behaviors are justified and which are unjustified
- Moral economy: states that moral ideas guide social interactions and shape institutions, e.g. families, markets, and welfare states
- Third age = healthy life years after retirement

### Basic idea

Demographic structures change faster than moral ideas about population groups. The third age, e.g., has been expanding for a long time, while the public image of old age only slowly shifted from a problem- to an activity-centered one. Policy-makers who encourage older people to be active, e.g. through delayed retirement or volunteering, often encounter opposition, partly because of persevering moral ideas that older people need protection.

### Example: Changing ideas of old age

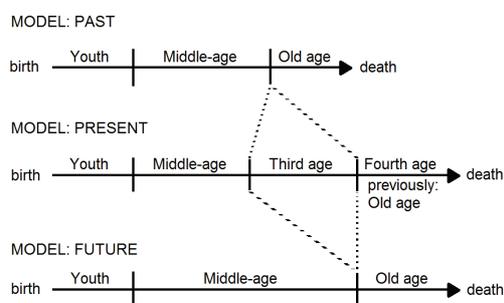


(data on European countries, from ESS 2006; Eurostat 2012; WHO 2012)

As the third age expands, the older population becomes more heterogeneous, and ideas of when men should retire become more diverse.

**Economic crisis** and population ageing further change the character of old age. They tie the image of old age closer to the idea of a problem again. Moreover, they will lead to a shrinkage, possibly even disappearance, of the third age.

### Development of the life-course



The life-course used to be split into three phases: youth, middle-age and old age, with the latter representing the time after retirement. When people retired earlier and the healthy life-expectancy increased, old age was further split into the third age (retirement years in good health) and the fourth age (retirement years in poor health). Due to the current trend towards later retirement, the third age might disappear again in the future.

### So what?

- Third age probably is a transitory phenomenon: emerged and will disappear again
- Policy-makers deal with today's demographic situation, while having to "sell" it according to yesterday's moral standards
- Policies encourage productivity in old age ("third age policies") will only become popular when the third age is already disappearing again
- Tensions in society and policy-making partly result from a time lag in moral development



### For more information, see

Kathrin Komp's homepage <http://www.kathrin-komp.eu>

The homepage of the conference "Ageing in the light of crises: Economic crisis, demographic change, and the search for meaning" <http://www.eventus.trippus.se/crisis2012>

