

„Das Ewige Gestern“

Conversing with Ekkehard Schröder

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Longing for the past, *das ewige Gestern* [the eternal yesterday] in beautiful German, was one of the most intriguing findings to come from my research into the experiences of ageing in Ghana. Older people can't stop talking about the good old times, it seems—not only in Ghana, but also in my own society, the Netherlands. They bore their younger listeners with their stories and as a consequence drive them away.

When Ekkehard Schröder visited me for a few days in September 2018, *das ewige Gestern* became a recurring topic in our lengthy conversations. We were—*are*—both ageing. I had retired from the university and from 24 years of editorship of the Dutch journal *Medische Antropologie* and he was retiring from being the editor of the German sister journal *Curare* (after a period of forty years!). We had much in common and I was curious to hear his opinion about that annoying habit of older people always talking about the past. He was much milder than me:

It is normal that older people like to speak about the past; it is their life! I would, for example, like to hear how my mother fell in love with my father (which I never asked, I am sorry to say). As a young person, I liked the stories of my uncle who had been in the war. I wanted to know more about that time. My own father had been taken away by the Russians and never returned. I wanted to know more about the events of that period. That is what older people should do: tell stories.

I “defended” my view and pressed him to consider the other, less pleasant, side of older people's storytelling. I asked him about his views as a psychiatrist. “As a psychiatrist I have nothing to say,” was his provocative response. We “fought” for a while, but finally he agreed to share some of his experiences with pathological features of *das ewige Gestern* in his work as a psychiatrist. I let him speak, although I had never thought of my view of

this irritating habit of older people as “pathological.” Indeed, like him, I also found it “normal,” but for another reason.

Ekkehard gave examples of clients whose main problem originated from a kind of generation conflict. Some were mothers who disagreed with their daughters about the upbringing of their children, a conflict that had escalated to traumatic dimensions, extending to moral disavowals of the relationship as a whole. But, he emphasized, a psychiatrist deals with organic aspects: reduced cognitive and emotional features of the older person, aggression as a change of character for example, passivity, disorientation in everyday situations. In short: involution of personality due to ageing.

Gradually our conversation then drifted away from the psychiatrist's parlour to everyday life and language. “In daily German we make a distinction between *alt* [old] and *greis* [geriatric],” he said. “*Greis* as both an adjective and as a noun (which translates as ‘old person’) refers more to senility.” People say: “*Wir sind alt aber nicht Greise*” [We are old but not senile]. Always talking about (and usually exalting) the past and criticizing the present could be a result of being *greis*... Disproportionate nostalgia, slightly pathological perhaps but also quite normal.

This clinging to the past seems to be present in all times and places. Cicero wrote that “in the past” (in the time of Cato the Elder) people still had respect for the elderly. The elderly people I spoke to in Ghana forty years ago complained of the immorality of the youth of their time. But forty years later, the youth of that former time—now around sixty themselves—complained about the youth of today. And when I open an old Ghanaian ethnography, I read that the elderly seventy years ago had exactly the same complaints about their youthful contemporaries. Such complaints can go quite far. Certain older German persons, accord-



Fig. 1 Ekkehard and the author in Oud Ade.

ing to Ekkehard, do, for example, complain about the youth of today by saying: “*Bei Hitler hätte es das nicht gegeben*” [In Hitler’s time this would not have happened].

In all cases there is a glorification of the past and a condemnation of the present by the elderly; a hodiecentrism that for the elderly is in the past

and for the younger generation is in the present (which will soon be the past). How should we interpret this widespread tendency among people growing older?

I see it in terms of older people, who do not want to disappear, fighting a rearguard action [*Rückzugsgefecht*]. They therefore rub in young-

sters' faces the fact that they (the elderly) were also once young, beautiful and strong and have accomplished a lot. Young people do not realise this in their silliness and only know the elderly as elderly. It is just like (some) doctors who see their patients only as patients and do not realize the full person lying there on the bed. As Gerhard Nijhof complained, the doctor only knew him in a horizontal position (NIJHOF 2018). The silliness of the young works in two directions. In their youthful hubris, they also do not realize that they themselves will soon be old and will be pushed aside.

A quite famous example of this reaction by the older generation which stresses that they too were once young and strong, comes from a poem by an old lady who died in the geriatric ward of a small hospital near Dundee, Scotland (ANON. nd). The nurses found it after her death. Here are a few fragments:

What do you see, nurses, what do you see?
 What are you thinking when you're looking at me?
 A crabby old woman, not very wise,
 Uncertain of habit, with faraway eyes?

Is that what you're thinking? Is that what you see?
 Then open your eyes, nurse; you're not looking
 at me.

I'll tell you who I am as I sit here so still,
 As I do at your bidding, as I eat at your will.
 I'm a small child of ten...with a father and mother,
 Brothers and sisters, who love one another.
 A young girl of sixteen, with wings on her feet,
 Dreaming that soon now a lover she'll meet.
 A bride soon at twenty—my heart gives a leap,
 Remembering the vows that I promised to keep.
 At twenty-five now, I have young of my own,
 Who need me to guide and a secure happy home.
 A woman of thirty, my young now grown fast,
 Bound to each other with ties that should last.

I'm now an old woman...and nature is cruel;
 'Tis jest to make old age look like a fool.

I remember the joys, I remember the pain,
 And I'm loving and living life over again.
 I think of the years...all too few, gone too fast,
 And accept the stark fact that nothing can last.

So open your eyes, nurses, open and see,
 ...Not a crabby old woman; look closer...see ME!!



Fig. 2 Ekkehard cycling through the Dutch polders.

I am not suggesting that this post mortem statement is an example of the perennial complaining of older people that I referred to above. On the contrary, it is an eloquent correction of the short sightedness and naïve hodiecentrism of youth. Here I would, however, focus on the short sightedness of the older generation, who cannot accept their “close of day,” to quote another well-known poem (by Dylan Thomas).

Some older people want to position themselves against the new generation. However, they do not derive their value from the present but from the time that they were young themselves. There is an implicit “ageism” in their glorification of the past. By displaying their youth, they seem to deny the value of their present old age. One could say that old and young in their “conflict” unanimously reject old age and praise youth. The worse and more miserable that the “good old times” were, the more excellent they themselves come forward in these memories, because they had the strength to overcome such hardship. They are not like the “wimps” of today who have no idea of poverty, hunger or pain.

In this way, the elderly think they can impress the younger generation, but they are mistaken. The irony is that their bragging about the past and

their rejection of today is counterproductive and depicts them as peevish old people who have not gone along with the times. They only reap pitying rejection from the young, the exact opposite of what they intend. Successful ageing includes a sportsmanlike acceptance of the losses that life has in store for everyone: an important lesson for all those who are retiring.

References

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