

## **Introduction**

The UBIAS 'Topic of the Year' (ToY) is a topic of global significance that will provide network member institutes with a possibility for engaging with and addressing an important topic through organizing various academic activities locally at the institutes, with respect for the particular expertise available and the special interests of the academic communities at each institute. The ambition behind the ToY is to gain new insights and to strengthen intercommunication between member institutes. Through announcements at the UBIAS website the possibility for mutual inspiration and participation in these activities is created.

## **UBIAS Topic of the Year 2018**

### **Aging**

#### **– Life, Culture, Civilizations**

As we grow older, our organism changes in ways that will reduce our ability to respond to stress, and hereby increasing the homeostatic imbalance and the risk of many medical diseases. These biological changes are accompanied by a range of psychological and social changes such as cognitive and physical decline, dependency on social care and medical treatment. Are these changes unavoidable? Is it possible through social, societal, psychological or medical means to hold back signs of aging? And is it even desirable? What is in fact "age" from a biological point of view, and do absolute limits to the potential "age" of living organisms exist? Of civilizations? Of the universe?

Populations are aging, i.e. a proportional increase in the number of older people is observed in most countries. Significant demographic changes are unfolding. UN predictions put the world population at 8 billion in 2025 (compared with 3 billion in 1960), and at 9+ billion in 2050. This dramatic growth is driven by more people surviving beyond childhood and having children of their own, moreover by people surviving (in increasingly better health) considerably longer than in past centuries. Still there are countries which do not contribute to the overall growth of the world's population, where we can rather observe decreasing birth rates coupled with increasingly ageing populations.

Demographers expect that life expectancy will increase by close to five years between today and 2050. Increasing longevity is associated with so-called healthy aging, i.e. more healthy years added to life (compression of morbidity). This underlines the large welfare gains associated with these changes. But problems remain: the increase in longevity is not equally distributed, and the social gradient remains strong, which in turn raises several issues.

Moreover, the consequences are diverse and reacted to differently in different parts and societies of the world. A consequence of falling child mortality but continuing high fertility is a "youth bulge", i.e. a high population of young people. This situation is found in many African countries, where the median age in some countries is as low as between 15 and 16 (e.g. in Angola or Niger), bringing with it as a major challenge high rates of youth unemployment. This, in turn, is leading among other things to frustration, social unrest, and migration. The opposite

demographic shift, increasingly ageing populations, we can observe, for example, in many European countries. An aging population, with a dramatic growth in many age-related disorders, such as dementia, is considered an economic and societal challenge in large parts of the world.

“Age”, however, should also be addressed and analyzed in a broader context and from other disciplinary perspectives. The ways in which we view and interpret signs of aging as well as the age segmentation of the human life span (e.g. when are we considered old?) have changed through history and are subject to major cultural differences. Do cultures and societies themselves have an “age”? Does our universe? What about cultural artefacts, from buildings to works of art: which are the roles of “age” here? And what about the age of concepts? Of sciences?

## **From local to global engagement**

‘Topic of the Year’ activities are organized locally. Activities could range from a single event to a series of events, such as a public lecture or discussion, a workshop/seminar/conference or a lecture series at your Institute. All kinds of activities, from small to large, from one afternoon to a continuing activity are possible. Institutes could consider inviting colleagues/fellows from other institutes as speakers or guests. Some institutes might think of a joint activity with another/other member institute(s).

To create a space for intercommunication and inspiration between Institutes on the ‘Topic of the Year’, we encourage members to share information on ToY events to be posted at the UBIAS website. Please send this information by email to Lena Bering, **lber@aias.au.dk** to be published under the headline of the Topic of the Year. The format should be up to 5 lines describing time and place of the event, its format, and of course which network institute it is assigned.