

Ageing and Popular Culture

As the 'grey market' perpetuates the quest for eternal youth, the biological realities of deep old age are increasingly denied. Until now, social theorists have failed to assess the cultural implications of continued population ageing. *Ageing and Popular Culture* is the first book to trace the historical emergence of stereotypes of retirement and document their recent demise. Its argument is that, although modernisation, marginalisation, and medicalisation created rigid age classifications, the rise of consumer culture has coincided with a postmodern broadening of options for those in the Third Age. With an adroit use of photographs and other visual sources, Andrew Blaikie demonstrates that an expanded leisure phase is breaking down barriers between mid- and later life and that biographical and collective visions of ageing need to be reconciled. At the same time, 'positive ageing' also creates new imperatives and new norms with attendant forms of deviance. While babyboomers may anticipate a fulfilling retirement, none relish decline. Has deep old age replaced death as the taboo subject of the late twentieth century? If so, what might be the consequences?

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Preface

In the jacuzzi at a leisure club I attend, one of the older swimmers once asked me what I did for a living. I told her I was a sociologist. ‘Oh, yes, and what do they do?’, she intoned. It took some restraint not to respond ‘Watch people sitting in hot tubs’, but I bit my lip and nobody fled the scene. In fact, I have never been an ethnographer. However, my curiosity about my fellow human beings has led me to formulate ideas about what they do with their lives on the basis of casual observation. This, of course, is a hit-and-miss process, and many aspects of later life, particularly those not evident in public places, or hidden away in institutions, are simply invisible. Nevertheless, like many who have reached a stage of adulthood where they are wondering what their futures may hold, I have detected changes in the presentational styles of old age: these ladies are not like I remember my grandparents when they were sixty-five, some forty years ago. But, then, forty years ago I was hardly old enough to appreciate ageing in the way I do today. Through engaging in a disquisition on ageing and popular culture I would like to think that I am attempting to focus interest by unearthing more knowledge than is apparent from superficial spectatorship. Yet social knowledge is contextual, its differing resonances depending not only on when it is written and read and by whom, but also on the age of both writer and reader.

Perhaps it is a necessary quality of the supposed ‘objectivity’ of scholarship, but rarely do academics write about topics of which they have first-hand personal experience. Later life is a case in point, although Britain has particularly honourable exceptions in Margot Jefferys, Peter Laslett, and Michael Young.¹ I need then to begin with a

¹ M. Jefferys (ed.), *Growing Old in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1989); P. Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989); M. Young and T. Schuller, *Life After Work: The Arrival of the Ageless Society* (London: HarperCollins, 1991). Jefferys has also produced a reflexive personal account (M. Jefferys, ‘Inter-generational relationships: an autobiographical perspective’, in A. Jamieson, S. Harper, and C. Victor (eds.), *Critical Approaches to Ageing and Later Life* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997), pp. 77–89), as have North American

disclaimer: I am not old. I am not long into mid-life, and, while I wish for many more years, at the same time I do not wish to grow old if that involves any major constriction of opportunity. This book arises from that contradiction. Why is it that this babyboomer, born in the middle of the twentieth century – a potential pensioner – wishes to remain forever young or, at least, non-aged, and what may be the implications, assuming I am typical of my generation?

Karl Mannheim reminds us that generations are ‘self-consciously formed by relatively unifying historical experiences’.² It follows that, whilst I am ill equipped to form judgements about later life since I have yet to arrive there, my own socially and historically located fears and expectations of it will necessarily colour any world view that I may have. Because of this I shall say comparatively little concerning ‘experience’, be this in the sense of skills and knowledge accumulated over time, or the lived reality of being old.³ However, I will attempt to trace the lineages of the current situation, to account for how the cultural climate surrounding ageing from mid- to later life came into being. To that extent, this history is, first, a genealogy of knowledge in the Foucauldian sense: rather than attempting to furnish an empirical history of old age, it interrogates a number of discourses about ageing and tries to establish the links between them. Secondly, as a sociology, it elaborates some of the connections between power, discipline, surveillance, and control, essentially the impact of such discourses upon older people and society more generally.⁴

But there is also a more personal accommodation. It has been conjectured that people become experts in the study of ageing because this allows them to distance themselves from their own fears of decline and mortality. Arguably, indeed, such ‘gerontophobia’ explains some of the present predicament of the so-called ageing enterprise, the industry that has developed on the back of our ageing population.⁵ Although this position has many detractors, perhaps we are all guilty of some measure

gerontologists Wilma Donahue, Bernice Neugarten, and Matilda White Riley. However, as one discussant points out, here the list ends (W. A. Achenbaum, ‘Critical gerontology’, in Jamieson, Harper, and Victor, *Critical Approaches*, pp. 16–26 (p. 24)).

² M. Featherstone and A. Wernick, ‘Introduction’, in M. Featherstone and A. Wernick (eds.), *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 1–15 (p. 13).

³ On the definition and relevance of experience as pertaining to old age, see B. Bytheway, ‘Progress report: the experience of later life’, *Ageing and Society* 16 (1996), 613–24.

⁴ M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. C. Gordon (Brighton: Harvester, 1980).

⁵ C. L. Estes, *The Aging Enterprise* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979); B. S. Green, *Gerontology and the Construction of Old Age: A Study in Discourse Analysis* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1993).

of repression or displacement. Equally cynically, others have pointed out that, whereas in 1967 a politician could be cited remarking of old age that ‘the subject has no glamour’, by the 1980s, ‘the astute careerist might be well advised to specialise in “the elderly” as soon as possible’.⁶ The motives of the researcher, or cultural interpreter, thus require scrutiny. By way of an apologia, I simply offer the following account.

In the mid-1980s I was endeavouring to complete a thesis about unmarried motherhood in nineteenth-century Scotland, whilst living from a series of by-employments as a part-time tutor and lecturer. Like many in such a limbo, I was prepared to turn my hand to any kind of work for which I considered myself qualified, and, when a job arose as a Research Officer in the Social History of Old Age, I did not have to think for long before applying for the post. I was successful, and for the next two years embarked on a process of familiarisation that was to lead, again opportunistically, to employment as Lecturer in Gerontology, with a brief this time not to research but to run a programme of courses for mature students in adult and continuing education. I thus fell into ageing by accident, rather than by design. By the end of the decade I had become well entrenched in the professional domain of British social gerontology. However, a creeping unease dogged me. I felt something of a charlatan: many of those I taught were older than myself and, unlike them (mostly nurses and social workers), I had no practical working experience with older people. Moreover, though sympathetic, I did not feel the sense of mission shared by so many advocates for the cause of anti-ageism. I reasoned that my anxiety stemmed from having to see ‘old age’ as a social problem, and that, if I could only recognise another less judgemental vision, I would be better able to justify my role. ‘Objectivity’ would never do, but recourse to the sociology of knowledge persuaded me that it was important to ask how ‘ageing’ has been constituted, both at the level of disciplinary and political discourse, and in everyday life.

From where I stood as a thirtysomething, the theorisation of the life course suggested a means of exploring this issue in ways that incorporated the subjectivity of my personal engagement with ageing, in dialogue with students and researchers whose cultural, cohort, and professional situations positioned them differently. Consequently, I enjoyed the luxury of creating a masters’ programme in Life Course Development as a fertile testing ground for host of projects, ranging from developmental psychology through financial management to social policy, that had as a lowest common denominator a concern with

⁶ R. Means and R. Smith, *The Development of Welfare Services for Elderly People* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 362–3.

persons in mid- and later life, and, as a conjoint aim, the better understanding of the processes constructing the context in which these people found themselves. With hindsight, I think we were naive to expect that some kind of holistic vision could emerge from such a disparate range of encounters. Indeed, in my writing since then, I have found myself colluding willingly with positions that openly disavow the search for any monolithic meaning in ageing. During the past seven years I have vacated social gerontology for a more general role as a sociologist, and learned more to appreciate the impact of consumer culture, particularly its visual referents, on our interpretation of the ageing body and understanding of the life course. In the research presented here I have reflected on my changing interests since 1985. If there is an overarching theme it is the necessity to question the legitimacy of grand theory. What sociologists or gerontologists might choose to replace this with is an enormous question that I can address only briefly and rather elliptically. Nevertheless, I hope the flavour of that search becomes evident in course of the book.

The journey down these few years has been forked with many productive excursions, and a number of acknowledgements are in order. Social gerontologists are gregarious beings and I have benefited in countless ways from working in a number of committees, in particular the British Society of Gerontology, the Association for Educational Gerontology, the Centre for Health and Retirement Education, and the Centre for the Study of Adult Life. My colleagues, both at Birkbeck College, London, and in the University of Aberdeen, have provided the sustaining collegiality that is so important from one day to the next. And the students I have taught – encountered is perhaps a more apt term, for I have often learned from them – have been a constant stimulus, both in my home institutions and elsewhere. Age Concern England, the King's Fund Institute, and the Royal College of Art (DesignAge) have generously invited me to speak, and the BBC and Open University to broadcast. Through the kindnesses of colleagues who invited me to Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, China, and the USA, I also have been able to test out ideas on a number of international audiences. I hope in this largely British and sometimes esoteric work they will find something that chimes in with their own intellectual preoccupations and with cultural issues of ageing in their different communities. Against this, I have to say that great zones of territory remain untouched. For example, this book makes no reference to ageing in the developing world – a massive oversight in any work that purports to discuss 'culture', but one that others will surely rectify.

I should like to thank both the ESRC and the Nuffield Foundation for

funding which enabled the research in chapters 2, 6, and 7 to be undertaken, and several publishers for permission to reproduce parts of the following articles in adapted form: Whiting and Birch Ltd for 'Age consciousness and modernity: the social reconstruction of retirement', *Self, Agency and Society* 1, 1 (1997), 9–26 (in chapter 3); 'Images of age: a reflexive process', *Applied Ergonomics* 24, 1 (1993), 51–7, copyright with kind permission from Elsevier Science Ltd (in chapter 4); 'Photographic memory, ageing and the life course', *Ageing and Society* 14, 4 (1994), 479–97 (chapter 5), and 'Beside the sea: visual imagery, ageing and heritage', *Ageing and Society* 17, 6 (1997), 629–48 (chapter 7), with thanks to Cambridge University Press; 'Photographic images of age and generation', *Education and Ageing* 10, 1 (1995), 5–15, and 'Representations of old age in painting and photography' (with Mike Hepworth), in A. Jamieson, S. Harper, and C. Victor (eds.), *Critical Approaches to Ageing and Later Life* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997), pp. 102–17 (in chapter 6).

Archival research was conducted in numerous locations. It would be invidious to single out particular individuals for their good guidance – all were more than helpful and gave generously of their time and enthusiasm. To those anonymous referees who read the initial proposal for this book and one who subsequently read the full manuscript and proffered sage advice I am most grateful. Finally, I should like to add particular thanks to two colleagues, co-authors, and friends without whom several of the ideas discussed here could never have developed or flourished: John Macnicol and Mike Hepworth. Their abiding faith has borne me more than they know.

1 Introduction: foreign land

The trouble is that old age is not interesting until one gets there, a foreign country with an unknown language.¹

Jeanne Calment died as I was completing this book in the summer of 1997: she was 122. The oldest known person was interesting precisely because of her prodigious chronological achievement, and, in 1996, presumably for reasons of both novelty and posterity, a pop CD featuring her voice was released. A pensioner already when Hitler invaded France, and a grandmother since the 1920s, as a teenager she had met Van Gogh. Her accumulated biography may fascinate, but her longevity alone lent her a unique power: she could speak with the authority of one who was there about a time before anyone else living was born. All other sources of history are fixed – texts, images, voices even can be manipulated in the here-and-now, but the original datum remains a dead utterance. However, with Mme Calment we had a lifeline, literally her lifeline, tenuously connecting past and present. Where knowledge is power, her experience rendered her God-like. She was a time-traveller.

Although she was proud of her feat, less lofty considerations excited the oldest woman in the world: ‘A week before her 121st birthday, Jeanne Calment is agitated. “I hope you’ve remembered to get my shampoo”, she tells nursing staff in a commanding tone. “And my jewellery. I’ll be needing it for the photographs. What colour dress shall I wear? I always take so much pleasure from photographs.”’² Doubtless part of that pleasure lay in the immortality achieved via the transfer to celluloid, the moment captured forever. This offers a great irony, for photography, nowadays an ultimately democratic medium, allows us all a certain fame or, at least, a mark of recognition that will transcend our lives. History and imagery, then, are closely interwoven not only in the

¹ J. Ford and R. Sinclair, *Sixty Years On: Women Talk About Old Age* (London: Women’s Press, 1987), p. 51.

² A. Sage, ‘Six score and one’, *Observer Review*, 18 February 1996, 8.

portraits of the great and good, but also in the genealogies that we call family albums. In between lie all the anecdotes, narratives, texts, and icons of our age, the memoirs of statesmen, policy documents, caricatured silhouettes on road signs warning drivers of ‘elderly people’ in the vicinity, or perceptions of whole civilisations as ageing populations. In England and Wales there are almost ten 100th birthday parties every day and the number of British centenarians is growing by 8 per cent per year. By 2000, that statistic might include the Queen Mother, whilst in the next century more than a third of the affluent world – though not just its affluent elders – will be over sixty. Yet the fact remains that we are not especially interested in later life – except as a coda to social history – until we get there; and when we do we find ourselves disorientated by the crossing to a new land. If the past is a foreign country, so too is the future.

The last British press photograph of Mme Calment before her death is striking because in it she nonchalantly holds a cigarette from which a wisp of blue smoke emanates.³ In a shocking reversal of the *memento mori* image associating smoking with lung cancer, she cocks a snook at death. She has been lucky, we say. She has cheated the cathartic blows life brings. Is her survival unfair, immoral even? Or would we all like to get away with it, enjoy life without being reminded of our responsibilities to temper pleasure with dutiful moderation? By contrast, the oldest man in Britain is a Scots farmer who, at 108, ‘puts his longevity down to three factors: a bowl of porridge every day, never going to bed on a full stomach, and hard work’.⁴ It seems that we cannot observe such icons without reading into them a host of cultural messages about how life should and should not be led. Images act as catalysts for sociological inquiry.

In an effort to explain the dialogue between perceptions and social change, this study takes popular culture as its central theme. Defining this project is not easy, for, as Raymond Williams indicates: ‘Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language . . . mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines.’⁵ Sociology and history are key among these, and I do not intend a long disquisition on the interpretation of the term in either. I simply understand culture to mean the human creation and use of symbols. Whereas popular culture

³ J. Turney, ‘The age of the oldie’, *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 23 May 1997, 18–19 (p. 19).

⁴ ‘After 108 years, three days still make all the difference’, *Herald*, 22 August 1997, 2. The writer William Burroughs, notorious for his low-life drug addiction and sexual waywardness, died in the same week as Mme Calment at the age of eighty-three.

⁵ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Flamingo, 1983), p. 87.

conventionally emphasises phenomena that evolve within the general population, as opposed to the media, my interpretation focuses on the dialogue and dialectic between everyday perceptions, policy, media, and academic attitudes, and the lived realities of ageing.⁶ The symbols and signs that we understand as images form the backdrop to a contest for meaning. These are not the preserve of older people alone, nor are they just a fabricated set of stereotypes or ideological poses claiming control over definitions. Rather, the popular understanding of ageing is a negotiated process, albeit one that is rarely at the front of our minds because it happens to us all. I shall return to the theme of popular culture later in this chapter. First, however, something requires to be said concerning the sociological stance underpinning the argument.

Sociology: structure, agency, and ageing

It is useful to distinguish between theories proposing that behaviour and attitudes are determined by changes in political, economic, and social structures, and phenomenological approaches examining the emergence of consciousness in everyday life. Thus, I begin by examining two related, but often opposed approaches: social constructionism and symbolic interactionism. Social constructionists reject the view that ageing is simply ‘natural’, a pre-given essence, arguing that each individual’s experience is to a high degree moulded by socio-cultural factors. ‘Old age’ has had varying connotations according to historical periods, and differs between cultures. Similarly, factors such as material conditions during childhood or lifetime health behaviours – themselves class-related – are likely to have differential impacts upon longevity. Symbolic interactionists meanwhile contend that ‘social life depends on our ability to imagine ourselves in other social roles’.⁷ Blumer proposed that ‘human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them’ and that these meanings arise out human interaction.⁸ Thus, rather than inhering in objects (or subjects) themselves, the meanings we attach to them emerge from social processes. These processes and the motives that inform them are distinguished by our use

⁶ While ‘popular culture’ is sometimes taken to refer to the monolithic, trivial experiences of the subordinate ‘masses’, I see it as a negotiated definition between sets of meanings that vary according to one’s vantage point: for example, although ‘from above’ policy perceptions clearly differ from ‘from below’ pensioner perspectives, there exists sufficient common ground for ‘old age’ to be jointly recognised if differently interpreted.

⁷ N. Abercrombie, S. Hill, and B. S. Turner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 421.

⁸ H. Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective or Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), p. 2.

of communication through symbols. It follows that the ways we describe the world form our understanding of it; hence the prime significance of labelling, stereotypes, and images to the interpretation of ageing.

Among constructionist theories, the political economy perspective has been especially influential. Political economy is a conflict theory contending that social inequalities are grounded in the economic organisation of society, specifically capitalism.⁹ This approach sees retirement levels fluctuating over time as a result of politically driven labour force requirements, and posits the structured dependency of older people collectively on the rest of society as a consequence of limited and unequal access to resources, particularly income.¹⁰ As chapter 2 will indicate, the argument has proven particularly useful in establishing the parameters fencing in the experience of later life in twentieth-century Britain.

Fennell *et al.* are justifiably critical of the tendency to 'describe the activities and lifestyles of older people, rather than consider linkages between ageing and the social, political and economic structure', for great swathes of writing still report empirical studies in which theory is absent or unacknowledged.¹¹ However, through its stress on social structure, political economy runs the risk of reifying 'society', or 'retirement', as something 'out there' to which the individual must accommodate or resist. It limits the scope for individuals, or groups, to construct their own meanings and destinies. 'Structures' in themselves are not replete with social meaning, since older people (indeed, all of us) have identities and views which are immersed in tangible, personally experienced relationships. It follows that meanings and motives can be understood fully only at the micro-level, and, while the more persuasive studies drawing on the political economy perspective have incorporated this requirement, another more overtly sociological tradition has also emerged. Here context has been the watchword.

Attempts to contextualise ageing focus on the centrality of human awareness. Thus, although such external factors as the state of the economy may impinge upon everyday life, it is the ways in which these influences are interpreted that are of prime significance. Any notion of

⁹ C. Phillipson, *Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age*, ed. P. Leonard (London: Macmillan, 1982; Critical Texts in Social Work and the Welfare State), is the best-known British exposition.

¹⁰ G. Fennell, C. Phillipson, and H. Evers (eds.), *The Sociology of Old Age* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), pp. 52–5. For a review of literature on the political economy of old age, see M. Minkler and C. Estes (eds.), *Critical Perspectives on Aging: The Political and Moral Economy of Growing Old* (Amityville, NY: Baywood Press, 1991).

¹¹ Fennell, Phillipson, and Evers, *Sociology of Old Age*, p. 41.

'society' beyond that actively constructed *in situ* is an abstraction. Thus, although from a political economist's perspective the analysis of old age should concentrate on the construction and distribution of roles (political and economic as well as social), there is a complementary need for exploration centred on how social relationships are constituted through *social* encounters. Such thinking pervades ethnographic studies of old age subcultures, some of which are discussed in chapter 8.

In aiming to describe the life-world – the taken-for-granted everyday reality of ordinary older people – phenomenologists identify typifications, that is, languages and routines based on shared assumptions through which the social fabric is maintained. Such theorists stress agency, the ability of individuals to act independently – albeit intersubjectively – of any overarching social structure. Thus, their main demerit lies in neglecting the one concept seen as crucial by the political economists.¹² Neither macro-level social constructionism nor interactionist and ethnographic micro-studies are entirely satisfactory: the former risks portraying action as overdetermined by external forces, while the latter ignore these selfsame constraints. How, then, can we resolve the dualism of structure and agency, whereby, to paraphrase Karl Marx, ageing people make their own histories, but not under circumstances of their own making? The answer would appear to lie in theorising a dialectic between the life-world and the social structure.¹³

For Berger and Luckmann, the social construction of reality relies upon a three-stage process: first, people create culture; secondly, their cultural creations become realities, which through time are taken for granted as natural and inevitable; thirdly, this reality is unquestioningly absorbed as valid by ensuing generations.¹⁴ Thus ageing is made to appear self-evident, an inevitable aspect of the human condition, when, in fact, it is also a profoundly sociological – and historical – construct. Such unexamined taken-for-grantedness helps to explain why ageism is by no means always obvious to all affected by it. Two significant inferences might be drawn from this formulation: first, each individual is

¹² Ethnomethodology presents an extreme position whereby actions and utterances have meaning only within the context of their occurrence. The difficulties of this closed approach are demonstrated by linguistic studies of ageing where older people use language in different ways depending on the presence or absence of non-aged persons.

¹³ A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1979), has devised the concept of structuration to emphasise the interdependence rather than opposition of structure and agency. He argues that social structures do not so much repress individual endeavour as provide resources on which action is based; actions, in turn, create structures. Whilst this may be an elegant formulation, it fails to explain the determining force behind the dialectic of historical transformation.

¹⁴ P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

born and socialised into a ready-made cultural environment; secondly, the time of our birth will to a degree condition the ways we perceive things. World views are thus partially inherited and generationally distinct at the same time. Several strands in the present work derive from this observation, among them the emphasis on the differing attitudes and experiences of successive cohorts of elders (as manifest, for example, in the 'time-signatures' discussed in chapter 8), and, at the same time, the need to interpret continuities as well as disjunctions within individual life courses. This last point is crucial if we are to understand both how people make sense of their own ageing and how they act on the basis of these interpretations.

Life courses, world views, fresh maps

Whilst perceptions and evaluations of age are socially created, the ageing process itself is ultimately a biological one. Medical and cultural knowledges may be applied to extend or enhance the experience, but death will come to us all (although this does not negate the cultural significance of the manifold constructions through which, individually and collectively, we may attempt to deny or indeed celebrate the inevitability of mortality). Like every organism, the body goes into a state of irreversible decline following maturity. What is contentious is not this physiological fact, but how the social frame impinges upon it. 'Maturity' itself is a term capable of many and varied definitions and the biological is but one of these. Thus whilst stages of physical advancement can easily be gauged from visible signs of growth and puberty, childhood and adolescence are flexible social categories varying through time and across cultures. The seven-year-olds who were regarded, according to Ariès, as miniature adults in early modern Europe would be classified as children today.¹⁵ 'Adolescence' was a term coined as late as 1904, and what we now clearly recognise as 'youth culture' would have been difficult to discern before the Industrial Revolution. Equally, the subdivisions of later life are malleable because they are and have been similarly dependent upon social and cultural developments. For example, menopause is a biological process particular to females, but the 'mid-life crisis' is a historically recent, specifically Western concept appertaining to both men and women. Because such classifications have a significant impact, psychologically, economically, and socially, upon the ageing individual, life course perspectives begin from the standpoint of the individual passing through them.

¹⁵ P. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

Inputs from developmental psychology derive largely from the Jungian claim that many individuals find themselves at a turning point in mid-life, and that ‘we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life’s morning . . . Whoever carries into the afternoon the law of the morning . . . must pay with damage to his soul.’¹⁶ While the difficulty of managing this transition has been popularly linked with the notion of ‘mid-life crisis’,¹⁷ Erikson states that each stage of life includes a series of appropriate tasks to be fulfilled before moving on to the next phase. Thus, he argues, adult life sees a conflict between ‘generativity’ (producing and piloting the next generation and/or leaving an imprint of worth to society) and stagnation, which must be resolved prior to seeking the late life goal of ‘ego-integrity’, that is ‘an assured sense of meaning and order in one’s life and in the universe, as against despair and disgust’, which can only be achieved by accepting personal limitations, not least that one is mortal.¹⁸ While lifespan developmental psychologists have recognised the significance of early life experiences for how individuals deal with the changes of later life, so too gerontologists have latterly acknowledged the principle of contingency – ‘to understand people in late life it is necessary to see them in the context of their whole life history’.¹⁹ The legitimacy of studying older people without also interrogating their earlier lives has become somewhat strained. Although ‘elderliness’ is generally denoted by physical appearance, cognitive and social changes often move along separate trajectories: a person may look old but retain strong mental alertness and possess ‘youthful’ social attitudes. Alongside shared factors like structured dependency, which tend to collectivise the experience of later life, we must set the contention that as each individual ages so the stock of their differentness from the next person increases – the older the cohort, the greater is the degree of diversity and individuality to be expected. Hypothetically, people who have lived longer will have had more time in which reflect and act upon a broader range of experiences than younger

¹⁶ C. G. Jung, ‘The transcendent function’, in H. Read, M. Fordham, G. Adler, and W. McGuire (eds.), *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, 2nd edn, vol. VIII of *The Collected Works of C. J. Jung*, 20 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 396.

¹⁷ See E. Jacques, ‘Death and the mid-life crisis’, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 46 (1965), 502–14.

¹⁸ E. H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle: A Reissue* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), p. 103.

¹⁹ J. Bond, R. Briggs and P. Coleman, ‘The study of ageing’, in J. Bond and P. Coleman (eds.), *Ageing in Society: An Introduction to Social Gerontology* (London: Sage, 1990), pp. 17–47 (p. 27); L. Sugarman, *Life-Span Development: Concepts, Theories and Interventions* (London: Methuen, 1986), provides comprehensive coverage of the field.

people. At the same time variations according to class, race, gender, and culture are also likely to have become more entrenched.

The disruptive impact upon family patterns of economic recession, unemployment, and employment changes during the 1980s has led to fresh interest in gender and generational aspects of domestic and work relationships. As a guide to interpretation, developmental psychology is of limited value since concentration on individual experience necessarily restricts its utility as a sociological tool. However, a second approach, life course analysis, offers considerable attractions. Life course analysis has roots in the research of historical demographers in the United States, particularly Tamara Hareven, whose work focuses on the synchronisation, or otherwise, of 'family time' and 'historical time'.²⁰ Historical time is linear (rather than cyclical) and chronological, both in terms of individual lives ('when I was five', 'when I was forty-five') and in relation to the broad sweep of historical events (the Depression, the Second World War, the Sixties, the Nineties). Meanwhile, it has long been recognised that the family follows a cycle or sequence of stages through which individuals pass as they age. Thus as one's family career develops one's roles and responsibilities, as child, young adult, parent, and grandparent will differ. Moreover, the economic wellbeing of the family unit, as well as its social stability, will be affected as its composition alters over time. Changes in technology (Taylorism, Fordism, mechanisation, computerisation), the business cycle and policy – including retirement pensions – and the organisation of the labour force mean that one's work career, and family network, will be affected, in turn, by 'industrial time'. The sequences of industrial change will impact upon kinship obligations, forcing adaptations, for example, in who cares for children and older relatives. A contemporary instance would be the rise of female participation in the micro-components industry following their husbands' being made redundant from heavy manufacturing jobs. Does this entail a rise in male domestic work? Or are alternative arrangements made to look after young children or elderly kin outside the home? Or does a double burden fall upon women who must be both earners and domestic carers?

It would seem logical to add a further temporality, that of 'cultural time'. Cultural time would refer to prevalent values and attitudes, reflected in changes in age-appropriate behaviours – the styles, lifestyles, and hairstyles conventionally felt to match different age groups.

²⁰ T. K. Hareven, 'Family time and historical time', *Daedalus* 106, 2 (1977), 57–70; T. K. Hareven (ed.), *Transitions: The Family and the Life Course in Historical Perspective* (New York: Academic Press, 1978).

‘Acceptable’ age-norms of dress, sexuality, pastimes, and bodily appearance clearly vary according to one’s location in historical time.

These four axes of family, historical, industrial, and cultural time form trajectories that interact to contextualise the ageing process, yet I know of no single study that exploits such complementarity, nor of any attempt to merge life course analysis with lifespan developmental psychology. The virtues of applying such a model would be manifold: it addresses the interaction of micro- and macro-level factors; it provides a relational perspective that moves beyond unitary, age-based definitions of the subject; and it theorises relationships between life-stages, thus facilitating biographical research. However, the scale of such a task is awesome, and the present analysis, while hinting at the resonances for each stage and temporality, concentrates mainly upon cultural time.

Explaining shifts in cultural norms is not simply a matter of accounting for changing fashions. An important thread in my discussion concerns the challenge to ‘traditional’ cultural values which have imbued attitudes to ageing. The dominance of the work ethic, an orientation towards youthfulness, and belief in notions of ‘progress’ (however defined) can only be detrimental to those who have retired, are no longer young, and are thereby ‘outdated’. Arguably, however, such views are being eroded as consumerist values come to outweigh production-based ideals, leisure becomes a stronger currency, and the modernist, ever novel promise of capitalism gives way to a preference for niche markets and recycling of ‘heritage’. Chapter 3 considers the implications for a metamorphosis of social consciousness as post-modernity succeeds modernity, whilst chapters 7 and 9 in particular consider the ways in which memories, collective and personal, evoke both continuities and discontinuities in social patterns.

Whatever the cultural changes wrought by production and consumption patterns, the twentieth century has seen a monumental demographic transformation. By 2000 half the British population will be over fifty. Not until the 1920s did the proportion attaining age sixty exceed 10 per cent, but since then it has doubled.²¹ This secular shift has occurred throughout the developed world as a result partly of a distant cause, namely the massive reduction in infant mortality and improvements in child health. Expectation of life after fifty was rather slower to increase than the expectation at birth, but this too has shown a steady increase, particularly for women, who can now expect to live an average thirty years beyond fifty, as against twenty at the turn of the century. Old age has become progressively feminised because the further one moves

²¹ Laslett, *A Fresh Map*, pp. 49–50.

up the age scale, the greater the fraction of the population who are female. However, a parallel transformation has occurred with the emergence of retirement – until recently an overwhelmingly male experience – for, whereas nearly three-quarters of men aged sixty-five and over were still in paid work in the 1880s, by the 1980s less than 3 per cent remained in full-time employment.²²

The implications of these trends are sufficiently significant to require a major rethinking of the life course, or what Laslett refers to as *A Fresh Map of Life*. This is explored in chapter 3, but it is germane here to outline its crucial element – the rise of the Third Age. The emergence of retirement has coincided with the increase in numbers of people living beyond what has come to be considered ‘retirement age’. Thus, there are now more people than ever before spending a long phase of their lives in a non-work environment:

Male expectation of life in Britain implies that a man who is to leave work at fifty-five can look forward to spending as much time in retirement as he will spend in employment as early as his mid-thirties, twenty years more at his job and twenty years after he has left it. The corresponding figures for women are even more striking because they live longer and are expected to retire earlier.²³

For Laslett, the First Age broadly coincides with childhood, and the Second with adulthood and earning. The next, or Third, Age is generally bounded by the period between workending and the Fourth Age of ‘dependence, decrepitude, and death’. Thus, a division between Third and Fourth Ages effectively bisects the conventional category ‘old age’. Whereas decline as one aged may once have been gradual, the shape of the biological survival curve now reflects an abbreviation of the Fourth Age, so that following a long period of relatively good health, final illness is more and more likely to be steeply compressed into the very last years of life, beyond age eighty-five.²⁴ While both retirement age and the onset of ‘final decline’ or ‘terminal drop’ vary according to individuals, aggregate patterns reveal remarkable social changes. Nevertheless, Laslett insists that the expansion of the Third Age must be measured qualitatively since it ‘can only be experienced in the company of a nationwide society of those with the disposition, freedom, and the

²² A. Blaikie and J. Macnicol, ‘Ageing and social policy: a twentieth-century dilemma’, in A. M. Warnes (ed.), *Human Ageing and Later Life* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), pp. 69–82 (p. 69).

²³ Laslett, *A Fresh Map*, p. 90. Provisions towards the equalisation of state pensionable ages for men and women in the UK are currently being enacted.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 56–7. The phrase ‘compression of morbidity’ and the rectangular survival curve – so called because a long plateau of cumulative population survival suddenly dips, thus approximating a right angle – are explained in J. F. Fries and L. M. Crapo, *Vitality and Aging: Implications of the Rectangular Curve* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1981).

means to act in the appropriate manner'. This brings us back to the question of world views, since particular attributes, including the existence of widespread cultural norms, expectations, and wherewithal are necessary qualifications for Third Age membership. Acting in 'the appropriate manner' is central to Laslett's notion of the Third Age as the 'era of personal fulfilment' at a personal level and, collectively, a stage of cultural development where older people act as 'trustees for the future' of society.²⁵ He argues that, although Britain has been numerically a Third Age society since 1950 – the point when over half the people reaching twenty-five could statistically expect to reach age seventy – the nation lags far behind in achieving his desired cultural aim. Appreciative of this mismatch, the present analysis indicates where and why the gap is closing and where and why it is not.

Intriguingly, the 1940s and 1950s were also the formative period of social gerontology. To what extent, therefore, has the discipline succeeded in shadowing the emergence of a Third Age?

Gerontology as discourse

Gerontology, particularly in North America, is characterised by a rhetoric of holism, whereby the different theories and methods of biomedicine, psychology, and the social sciences are somehow supposed to converge around the central concern of old age. Despite crossover plenaries at major international conferences, the research evidence of such fusion is slight; rather, gerontology could be said to suffer from 'physics envy'.²⁶ Compared to most sciences, and, indeed, social sciences, it is an immature area. Many researchers have thus sought legitimacy through emulation of the established 'hard' sciences. This has led to the 'scientisation' of theory and methods in general, while social gerontology has been a poor relation to medical and psychological aspects of investigation.

In his perorations on handbooks about ageing, of which there are now several in the USA, Achenbaum is critical of 'multidisciplinary incantations'. Statements of the requirement for understanding human ageing from a number of disciplinary viewpoints simultaneously are also legion in the UK; however, research rarely delivers on such a promise, whilst consensus over aims has not promoted theoretical clarity: 'If historical, political, and economic features are as important as biological, psychological, and social factors in examining the contexts of the ageing process, why are they so underrepresented?' This is not helped by 'the

²⁵ Laslett, *A Fresh Map*, pp. 77, 196.

²⁶ Achenbaum, 'Critical gerontology', p. 16.

mix of science and advocacy that colours much research on ageing' whereby gerontology pretends to be both value-free and value-based in the same breath.²⁷

Until the 1960s the social study of ageing was dominated by a 'social problems' perspective concerned with policy and welfare needs. However, it has been suggested that the influence of cultural movements thereafter and political organisation amongst older people (the Gray Panthers in particular) have influenced a shift towards approaches which question assumptions made by the non-aged. The very coining of the term 'ageism' testifies to this.²⁸ Since the 1970s interest has grown in the social construction of ageing, in lived experience, and in normal as against pathological ageing. There is now a clear division between gerontology as a branch of biology which 'treats aging as a genetically programmed process' and social gerontology. Nevertheless, sociologists agree that 'despite these changes, gerontologists are still concerned with social rather than sociological questions'.²⁹ Pensions, older people, and retirement represent objective social problems rather than subjects for investigation in their own right and on their own terms.

Moreover, the historical ascendancy of gerontology presents analytical problems of its own. Any sociological study of 'old age' or 'the elderly' must acknowledge that these are social constructs formulated within a disciplinary context. 'Old age' and 'the life course' are labels which are deployed to classify people. And, as Katz points out, discourses on ageing are also disciplinary in the sense that they aid the process of regulation and control of older people.³⁰ There are parallels here with Foucault's analysis of madness, which argues that the criteria used to label individuals changed over time according to shifting ways of thinking and writing about insanity. More than ideologies, these discourses had real effects, not only because alternative rationales were precluded, but also because thinking was translated into action – real 'mad' people were incarcerated.³¹ Gerontological research, like all discourse, demands the conceptual integration of 'islands of knowledge',³² yet, claims Achenbaum: 'We are in a phase of being data rich and theory poor ... An investigator's first research on ageing usually

²⁷ W. A. Achenbaum, 'One United States approach to gerontological theory building', *Ageing and Society* 9 (1989), 179–88 (182, 184).

²⁸ R. Butler, *Why Survive?: Being Old in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

²⁹ Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, *Penguin Dictionary*, pp. 11, 182.

³⁰ S. Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (Charlottesville, VA, and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

³¹ M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (London: Tavistock, 1971; orig. published 1961).

³² J. E. Birren and V. L. Bengtson (eds.), *Emergent Theories of Aging* (New York: Springer, 1988), p. ix.

begins with a microtheory derived from a subpart of the discipline in which the investigator was trained . . . [Gerontology is a] land of many islands with few bridges between them.³³ Again, to borrow from Foucault, the present analysis is underpinned by a quest to derive an ‘archaeology of knowledge’ about ageing – to indicate the context-bound origins of the accretion of meanings piled layer upon layer over one another as older moral understandings have been superseded by the apparent rationality of scientific interpretation. If such a historical brief reveals discontinuities, so too the disciplinary domains it interrogates – gerontology and, rather cursorily, geriatrics – represent a connectivity between areas of theoretical endeavour that strain the ‘archipelago’ metaphor. As chapter 2 indicates, geriatrics as an ‘expert’ discourse had the effect of moving persons labelled ‘senile’ into ‘homes’, while, more generally, the policy agenda for ‘old age’ eventually stipulated the retirement pension for all above a certain age. Regarding discourses as all-encompassing can, however, lead to an effacement of lived reality:

The emphasis on discourse assumes cultural effects that may be more apparent than real.

Far from suffering the effects of surveillance and medicalisation, many elderly people in modern society have suffered from neglect and loneliness, not to mention physical hardship and poor health. And it might be argued that far from being over-regulated and subject to powerful forms of surveillance, older people have all too often been marginalised and left to fend for themselves . . . A more balanced view would need to bring into account the changing *experience* of growing old.³⁴

Discourse as gerontology

Paradoxically, one way out of the dilemma posed by a positivist faith in quasi-scientific ‘facts’ (medicalised models) versus an adherence to the veracity of contextual accounts (which may be meaningful but are infinite in their variety) may be via discourse analysis. Discourses are social constructs in that they constitute mechanisms and boundaries through which identities may be interpreted. It follows that all items

³³ J. E. Birren, ‘My perspective on research on aging’, in V. L. Bengtson and K. W. Shaie (eds.), *The Course of Life: Research and Reflections* (New York: Springer, 1989), cited in W. A. Achenbaum, ‘Images of old age in America, 1790–1970: a vision and a revision’, in Featherstone and Wernick, *Images of Aging*, pp. 19–28 (p. 20).

³⁴ M. Bury, Review of Katz, *Disciplining Old Age, Ageing and Society* 17 (1997), 353–5 (pp. 354–5). Foucault has been criticised for ‘giv[ing] us history as a subject-less structure, and one in which men and women are obliterated by ideologies’ (E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), p. 387, n. 34).

contained within a discourse, be these people, bodies, utterances, memories, images, or policy documents, may be read as 'texts' or 'narratives'. The research task then becomes one of searching for internal consistencies or coherence within and between texts, rather than measuring these against some objective external truth. Far from making claims about authenticity, interpretation is concerned with situating individual cultural phenomena within a larger world view in order to establish their 'documentary meaning'.³⁵ Put this way, discourse analysis has great appeal when applied to visual sources. As with content analysis, which attempts to quantify data rather than evaluate, there is the problem of classifying material according to a set of categories or textual elements which are pre-determined or created by the researcher. However, when, as in chapter 5, one discourse (that of social gerontology) is ranged against another (photographic representation of older people), contradictions emerge that alert us to the dangers involved in privileging any singular interpretation.

The postmodern turn

Other juxtapositions reflect the development from undifferentiated mass society (modernity) to an increasingly subtle commodity culture in which individuals choose their identities (postmodernity). As the culture industries, especially the popular media, have become more sophisticated, so individual lives have become personal 'projects' revolving around 'lifestyles' which can be bought in the market place. At the same time the notion of an integral, coherent self has been fragmented so that identity can change at different stages in the life course. There is thus a tension between the biographical idea of a continuous developing self and the postmodern notion of the multiple, situational self. These changes signify movement from a status system organised around production to one based on consumption. And, in so far as older people are regarded as consumers of leisure, rather than persons who have retired from production, the shift has been a liberating one.

Where does this leave the interpreter? Bauman points out that 'comment on our daily experience cannot be more systematic than the experience itself'.³⁶ One does not have to endorse postmodernism as an analytical view to accept that contemporary culture thrives on pastiche, self-conscious irony, and relativism. It might be argued that any attempt to analyse ageing in the final quarter of the twentieth century can result

³⁵ See K. Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956).

³⁶ Z. Bauman, *Thinking Sociologically* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 19.

only in a crisis of representation, either because theories are too categorical and falsely stereotype ‘the old’, or, on the contrary, because our reflexivity reduces the ‘otherness’ of ageing, thus rendering gerontology superfluous.³⁷ But this does not mean that the representations one can discern are without fascination for the sociologist whose role it is to elucidate complexity, not to simplify life. Although social science has sometimes been delegated the task of undermining ideologies, I prefer to pursue a more humanistic quest for meaning.³⁸ Perceptions need to be deconstructed rather than demoted. In this sense, my arguments are driven more by Weberian sociology than by critical gerontology.

A time for age?

Pilcher points out that ‘like class, ethnicity, and gender, age is a social category through which people define and identify individuals and groups within society. Age is both an important part of how we see ourselves and how others see us’, not least because it ‘acts as an important basis for the distribution of social prestige ... [a]ccess to power, material resources, and citizenship’.³⁹ To the extent that it acts as an organising principle, ageing may be understood either by reference to perspectives that emphasise structural organisation of society at the macro-level (theories of cohort and generation, functionalist and political economy approaches), or interpretative, processual theories, concerned with individuals and the role of meanings, including lifespan developmental psychology and interactionist sociology.⁴⁰ Studying the recent history of old age requires a combination of macro- and micro-level approaches, although, since motivations are rarely recoverable save by oral accounts and popular literature (both of which present methodological minefields), scholars have tended to concentrate on textual, policy-related materials that inevitably produce rather schematic accounts of what the powerful did, or wished to do, to *the* elderly as an objectified social category.

In the popular media, a vision which pictures old people as a passive and pathological problem group characterised by dependency has been partially eclipsed by ‘positive ageing’ messages about the hedonistic joys of leisured retirement. Thus, a recent study of the adventurous freedoms of retirement on the road in recreational vehicles (RVs) begins by

³⁷ See Jamieson, Harper, and Victor, *Critical Approaches*, p. 185.

³⁸ J. Habermas, *Towards a Rational Society* (London: Heinemann, 1971)

³⁹ J. Pilcher, *Age and Generation in Modern Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

castigating academics for failing to grasp contemporary realities: 'If students gained their understanding of old age only by reading the contents of gerontological journals, they would assume it is a bleak and hopeless time of life.'⁴¹ This is reflected in the social construction of emotions, where romance (and sexual pleasure) are devalued, whilst loneliness is lent a spurious appropriateness as the master-emotion of later life.⁴² When the old were the 'deserving poor', there was little demand to overturn the structures of society. However, as the experiences of today's ThirdAgers begin to resemble those of adolescence, why have we not seen the emergence of a new band of folk devils (and the release of pent-up *Sturm und Drang* this implies) to complement the moral panic over the 'burden of dependency'?

Ageism and cultural studies

The oft-heard, oxymoronic statement that 'the elderly are a heterogeneous group' exemplifies our paradoxical understanding of old age through the twentieth century. We have categorised and classified a social phenomenon and in the process labelled all old people, yet we have latterly recognised the necessity to deconstruct the monolithic disregard for human diversity resulting from such perception, policy, and practice. There exists a tension 'between the pull towards oversimplifying stereotypes of youth and age and the opposite pull towards the discovery of increasing complexity and differentiation'.⁴³ Inevitably, in its historical and historiographic concerns, this project acknowledges a more general stricture (for 'women' substitute 'older people') that sometimes, 'one cannot study the experiences of women as a group, but one can study a popular conception of women, since it treats all women alike'.⁴⁴ This vision of homogeneity often provokes offence, the point being the use of the definite article: discussing elderly people is fine, elderliness being a qualification referring to their condition (they are persons who happen to be elderly), but to talk of *the* elderly is to create a category of people definable by their elderliness alone (they can possess no existence independent of their elderliness, and are thus considered 'not fully human'). According to such a position, 'elderly' is acceptable

⁴¹ D. A. Counts and D. R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill: An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in America* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1996), p. 16.

⁴² M. Hepworth, 'Ageing and the emotions', *Journal of Educational Gerontology* 8, 2 (1993), 75–85.

⁴³ Featherstone and Wernick, 'Introduction', p. 9.

⁴⁴ L. J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939–1945* (Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 5.

when used as an adjective, but not when used as a noun.⁴⁵ However, the noun 'elder' appears to create no such problem.

Ageism needs locating. The reasons behind discrimination are frequently economic, but the capacity to maintain oppression is primarily psychological. Ageism is both institutionalised in the social structure – legally, medically, through welfare, education, and income policies – and internalised in the attitudes of individuals. In a capitalist society people are valued on economic terms, and, whilst young dependants – children – are regarded as potential assets, older people are not. It has been argued, therefore, that the structured dependency of 'the elderly' as a group, which developed with the emergence of retirement, has generated accompanying forms of legitimation: ideological supports have been provided through biological reductionism (rights denied because of disability, frailty, or failing health), psychological explanations (dependency reflects child-like behaviour and status), and social justification (old people want to disengage from society).⁴⁶

According to this perspective a constructed consensus disguises major variations in interest between different groups of pensioners, particularly between those who rely on the public sector and those who have private pensions. Class differences persist into and may be exacerbated by old age. We need also to recognise and assess the double jeopardy of ageism and sexism as this applies to women as well as the triple jeopardy faced by ethnic elders.⁴⁷ In the context of all the rhetoric about 'care in the community', the relative balance between family support and state assistance is also significant, as is the distinction made between the 'young old' and 'old old'. Expert classifications made by scientists and bureaucrats sometimes ramify, at other times contradict, popular perceptions. Although retirement communities in many cases (Sun Cities, for instance) reflect voluntary self-segregation, to extrapolate that old age *per se* is subculturally distinct would be to denigrate attempts made by the Gray Panthers and many others to stress age-integration and interdependency across all age groups. Nevertheless, political expressions from older people highlight the requirement to balance social constructionist perspectives, imbued with notions of surveillance and control, with human agency arguments emphasising self-determination.

While both sociologists and gerontologists have generally stressed

⁴⁵ Fennell, Phillipson, and Evers, *Sociology of Old Age*, p. 7, discuss 'the stigmatising use of adjectives as nouns'.

⁴⁶ P. Leonard, 'Editor's Introduction', in Phillipson, *Capitalism*, pp. xi–xiv.

⁴⁷ C. Itzin, 'The double jeopardy of ageism and sexism: media images of women', in D. B. Bromley (ed.), *Gerontology: Social and Behavioural Perspectives* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 170–84; A. Norman, *Triple Jeopardy: Growing Old in a Second Homeland* (London: Centre for Policy on Ageing, 1985).

constructionism, the cultural studies tradition has placed great emphasis on the efforts of minorities to make their own cultures. The former have said a good deal about old age, but the latter have been extraordinarily quiet. There is still a reticence among sociologists to include ageing with the now conventional grouping of class, race, ethnicity, and gender among the key organising principles of social life. Gerontologists, meanwhile, tend to discuss old age, or ageing after retirement, rather than adopting a life course perspective that acknowledges the implications of earlier experiences for later developments. As a consequence, the academic discussion of age *in itself* is seen as marginal to a range of issues (gender differentiation, unemployment, equal opportunities) considered more pressing, both culturally and as regards social policy.

Nevertheless, cultural studies perspectives could provide useful inroads. For example, the feminist insight that public and private forms of culture are not sealed against one another has informed the ways in which 'a girls' magazine like *Jackie* ... picks up and represents some elements of private cultures of femininity by which young girls live their lives'. Such material tends to be instantly evaluated as 'girls' stuff' and trivial. Yet it has been argued that what is occurring is a re-appropriation among the targeted readership of elements first borrowed from their own culture.⁴⁸ Whether readers are so pro-active or whether they are more passive consumers, such popular literature forms a bedrock of their socialisation to modern adolescence. An analysis of older women's periodicals might reveal a similar story. Pick up your weekly edition of *People's Friend* and the cover nearly always depicts a country scene. Look inside, and you can read regular features called 'The Farmer and His Wife' and 'From the Manse Window', and holiday features on the Yorkshire Dales or Royal Deeside. There is rarely a city street in sight, not even in the advertisements. The fact that incontinence aids and chair lifts predominate among the latter is sufficient to remind us that 'The Famous Story Paper for Women' is mostly marketed at old ladies. But why should rural romance be so readily associated with such a social group? From the vantage point of today's elderly reader stuck in her inner city tenement or tower block, one can see why such values might appear comforting in a world of muggings, theft, and the 'breakdown of the fabric of society', the apparent collapse of the mores of community. The magazine retails a vision of an alternative world, in which justice and right prevail and everyone lives happily ever after. Above all it rekindles nostalgically their roots in former places of safety. Like *Jackie*, *People's Friend* publicly provides raw materials – be these fashion

⁴⁸ R. Johnson, *What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?*, CCCS Occasional Paper General Series, SP No. 74, University of Birmingham (1983), p. 23.

features, advice on relationships, escapist fantasies, or ideologies – on which readers reflect in order to construct their private lives. Indeed, the letters page and readers' photos are representations of this process in action.

The pastimes of older people provide much food for thought, but this requires to be matched by a ready eye for linking empirical observation with social theory. For example, relatively large numbers of working-class older women appear not only to enjoy watching all-in wrestling, but to invest considerable amounts of emotional energy in following each bout. The great semiotician Roland Barthes once argued that professional wrestling is a spectacle, rather than a sport, in which justice is played out in the ring: in the end, the good guy wins and the bad guy gets his come-uppance.⁴⁹ Could it be that the reason such theatre appeals to impoverished older women is that, when they have seen little justice in their own lives, to see the enactment of just deserts provides the catharsis that has otherwise eluded them? Psychiatrists would call this abreaction, but how might sociologists investigate further?

One reason why analysis of how older people make their own cultures has been lacking is because youth has occupied centre stage in both popular culture and sociological investigation since the 1960s. As the potential workforce, adolescents constitute future parents, producers, and consumers. Thus their styles of rebellion, resistance, and spending have been of critical interest. Until very recently little enthusiasm was shown for investing in the consumption potential of older people since they lacked both productive and reproductive capacities. We know that this has now changed, yet aside from cataloguing the efforts of political campaigns, we still know very little about old age cultures of discontent. If anything, popular journalists have stolen a march on academics here. Take, for example, a 1992 *Newsweek* article that notes how 'the generation that refused to grow up is growing middle aged . . . Baby boomers, by sheer force of numbers, have always made their stage of life the hip stage to be in', then proceeds to muse over the consequences, concluding with the remark of a New York management consultant that 'the whole concept of "retirement" should be retired'.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ R. Barthes, 'The world of wrestling', in R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (St Albans: Paladin, 1976), pp. 15–25.

⁵⁰ M. Beck, 'The new middle age', *Newsweek*, 7 December 1992, 50–6 (50, 56). There are no 'ageing' counterparts of the classic text on youth, S. Hall and T. Jefferson (eds.), *Resistance Through Rituals* (London: Hutchinson, 1976), the discussion of 'lads' subcultures in P. Willis, *Learning to Labour* (Aldershot: Saxon House, 1977), or of A. McRobbie's analysis, 'Working-class girls and the culture of femininity', MA thesis, University of Birmingham, 1977, reprinted in A. McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 35–60.

Whilst interest in the future drives such speculation, any cultural sociology of ageing must be historical. History helps us to understand the past as well as to trace the lineages of the present, but the alliance with sociology depends more especially upon three conceptual foci: first, sociology is concerned with both the transition to capitalism and, arguably, into late or post-capitalism, as historical processes; secondly, sociology focuses on the constraints imposed by particular social contexts upon individual life histories; thirdly, sociology shares with history a concern with empirical patterns of interaction between human agency and social structure.⁵¹ Given the preceding discussion, in explaining the contemporary popular culture around ageing it seems logical that an approach which can embrace both large-scale transformations in social policy and micro-level shifts in commonsense understandings might be the most plausible.

The framework of this study

In Britain the average expectation of life at birth in 1900 was fifty-three. As we reach 2000 it is in the high seventies. The most dramatic increases have been among the over-85s, but whilst the million or so persons soon likely to inhabit deep old age present the state (as they do governments throughout the developed, and increasingly also developing, world) with a major resource burden because of the declining health status of many of their number, this group remains proportionately slight. It is the huge rise in numbers living on not just into retirement – itself a twentieth-century invention – but now expecting to experience retirement as an expanded and active life course stage that is my main concern. The issue is deftly stated as follows:

Almost everyone used to work until they dropped. Now, just as life expectancy rises, we are moving people out of work earlier. How will we understand the shape of a life if paid employment takes up 35-odd years out of, say, 95? What are all these people going to do?

We have hardly begun to address this question. We have created a cult of youth which shows no signs of abating just because youth is on the wane: we are all old people pretending to be kids. Until we overcome this cultural lag between the facts of age structure and our preferred images and values, we will not begin to sort out how the brave new world of the old might look.⁵²

This book aims to construct a series of reference points by which a sociology of ageing appropriate to these matters might be anchored. Peter Laslett's *A Fresh Map of Life* offered a major re-interpretation of

⁵¹ P. Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Shepton Mallet: Open Books, 1982).

⁵² Turney, 'The age of the oldie', 18–19.

the life course and carried the message that it was time for Western societies to wake up to the social realities of population ageing.⁵³ But what factors were responsible for the invisibility of such a mass social phenomenon in the recent past? Chapter 2 examines the influence that particular readings of the recent history of ageing have had upon social thought while opening up the cultural construction of age for debate. The connections between popular perceptions and political questions are explored by looking at ageing in earlier times and considering problems with method, and in particular modernisation theories. In the past two decades much re-evaluation of the 'golden age of senescence' hypothesis has occurred, such that the once conventional wisdom that older people enjoyed high status in extended families in pre-industrial society has been fundamentally challenged. This chapter considers the historical analysis of the position of older people in the past by considering three filters through which understanding has percolated: modernisation, marginalisation, and medicalisation. The emergence of age-graded systems of classification as part of the bureaucratisation of the social system is considered from the point of view of its impact on high policy issues (retirement pensions), industrial questions (management of the workforce), and altered popular perceptions of age-appropriateness. In the same way that different discourses may be ranged against one another as an analytical aid, it is important to appreciate the value of triangulation: comparing the fruits of different approaches to the same issues in the hope that a nuanced picture of social reality will emerge. For example, when considering retirement in the interwar era, both 'from above' discussions amongst policymakers and social researchers and 'from below' attitudes struck by pensions campaigners are analysed, while popular cultural perceptions of ageing from tabloid cartoons and respondents in social surveys are also included. Thus the focus shifts between national and international concerns about population and resources and local, personal, and peer group apprehensions of ageing.

Despite major shifts in the position of older people in Western society during the first half of the twentieth century, accounts of the emergence of retirement have ignored the role of old age pressure groups, preferring arguments which emphasise structured dependency rather than human agency. Following the birth of welfare states, the stress remained on social investigation of pensioners in the community and frail elderly persons in institutions. Crucially, the development of appropriate ethics for managing ageing populations relies both on the images held by

⁵³ Laslett, *A Fresh Map*.

policymakers and on the role and impact of elders within the process. With the crumbling of the postwar consensus in both Europe and North America and the rise in age consciousness, older people have become more vocal and their interests more visible. However, the self-image presented by retired persons' associations frequently contradicts social images of older people held by non-pensioners. The shift from regarding old age as poverty-ridden and assistance-driven to seeing retirement as a generalised condition of leisure aspiration is not one that directly parallels the egalitarian concerns of politically active lobbyists. We are forced to look elsewhere for enlightenment.⁵⁴

Although the retirement pension and the costs of health care remain abiding concerns, a trend towards recreational and educational issues indicates growing awareness of later life as a period of cultural as well as economic diversity. This line of reasoning is initially pursued in chapter 3, then in more depth in chapter 8. Both chapters discuss the impact of population ageing upon popular culture, with special reference to the growing age consciousness exemplified by the emergence of the Third Age as a social phenomenon of the later twentieth century. The proportionate expansion of the population over pensionable age was far greater in the first half of the present century than it has been since, but institutionalisation of retirement and the stereotyping of old age rendered later life far less visible an experience than it has now become. The recognition that retirement now involves a period of up to thirty-five years of life after work prompts a sociological re-evaluation of this increasingly significant phase in the life course of most people. Policy-based studies emphasising the structured dependency of 'the elderly' are perhaps less germane than ethnographic approaches focusing on biography, community, and the presentation of self. The 'chronological bonds' which once bound people to age-appropriate behaviours are loosening as popular perceptions begin to stress the expectation of an extendible mid-life phase.

Arguably, as the Third Age expands in both quantity and quality, deep old age ('the Fourth Age of decrepitude and senility') suffers from yet more distancing, stigmatisation, and denial. Positive ageing is in part a response to population ageing by marketers anxious to stimulate demand. As consumer culture targets the 'grey market', positive ageing becomes conditional on the possession of sufficient income, cultural

⁵⁴ I have acknowledged the particular salience of political economy in the 'expert' analysis of the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, when old age was first conceived as a national social problem, because a cultural picture of later life can be derived only by reconstructing the policy environment. However, such a perspective is rather less significant in dealing with the contemporary cultural landscape, where, fortunately, other sources abound.

capital, and mental and physical health. Thus, while the phase of active adulthood expands to embrace many more seniors, stronger taboos form around those in poverty, those whose pastimes lack positive cultural resonances, and those suffering from disability and diseases such as Alzheimer's.

Chapter 4 considers the significance of Hollywood, television, and market models on the popular imagery of ageing as a process that is increasingly problematic for a global culture of consumerism that emphasises continuing youthfulness. The motion picture industry heralded a reworking of popular understanding of the relationship between the body and the self. From the 1920s onwards film stars codified a set of assumptions about youthful beauty. Increasingly the outer, visible body came to express 'personality' (in contradistinction to the Victorian idea of authenticity being dependent upon inner character formation). Slogans such as 'looking good, feeling great'⁵⁵ and 'it is normal to re-invent oneself'⁵⁶ express a readiness to seek accessible modes of rejuvenation such as anti-wrinkle creams, facelifts, and liposuction in the service of that youthful ideal of the 'performing self'. In particular, role models like Jane Fonda and Joan Collins demonstrate that 'glamour no longer has its sell-by date'.⁵⁷ Meanwhile the reality of population ageing means that advertisers are beginning to accommodate the notion that more potential consumers will be older and are beginning to redesign products accordingly. While the ergonomics of in-car comfort and easy-to-hold cutlery represent adaptations in line with physical changes, so too most elders demand fashion products that do not differentiate between themselves and younger people. Thus, while images of ageing reflect the social obsession with youth and physical health, older people modify the imagery in line with their needs and aspirations as their numbers, and spending power, increase. In their turn, image makers and market leaders influence social understandings and expectations of age-appropriateness, both for older people and future generations (themselves) in later life. Changing stereotypes of ageing are reviewed through an examination of postcards and cartoons while content analysis of selected magazines, including those aimed at people in mid- and later life, is used to provide a sharper instrument for reflecting significant transformations. These studies lead to the identification of style as the current keyword as personal fulfilment becomes an

⁵⁵ M. Hepworth and M. Featherstone, *Surviving Middle Age* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 90.

⁵⁶ J. Deitch, *Post Human* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1992), p. 27.

⁵⁷ A. Blaikie, 'Ageing and consumer culture: will we reap the whirlwind?', *Generations Review* 4 (1994), 5–7 (6). Cf. M. Kenny, 'Sex appeal has its sell-by date', *Daily Mail*, 28 February 1991, 32.

ever-more realisable goal. Although such a development signals an expansion of individual possibilities in later life, such potential is constrained by overarching structures of social power. For example, pre-retirement and mid-life planning courses (with titles like *Coping with Change*⁵⁸) assume that the individual makes adjustments within an agenda of retirement and redundancy that is broadly imposed upon him or her and that pensions are determined by external policy factors. Nevertheless, in the past fifteen years this pattern has shifted towards one where greater choice but also greater risk predominate, leaving older people perhaps less dependent but no less vulnerable.

Remaining with the theme of imagery, the discussion in chapters 5, 6, and 7 uses photography as an example of the ways in which the growing visual awareness of the body allows for a range of interpretations according to salient social factors. While the collusion of age-stereotyping and nostalgic views of the past has resulted in ageing people becoming symbols of a lost or disappearing world, photographic images can also be used therapeutically as a source from which older people (and younger) might reconstruct their identities. Such work represents one example of the ways in which a sense of self can be affirmed through biographical methods. However, the limits of reconstruction are also significant. Like any source through which memories may be evoked, photographs present illusory and selective images. In raising questions about how visual sources may be treated, chapters 5 and 6 suggest a cautious but positive evaluation: on the one hand, images have no meaning independent of the layers of cultural resonance that frame them; at the same time, and partly because of this, family therapists, reminiscence workers, and artists find that photographs have a catalytic value in prompting individuals to reassess their lives.

Chapter 7 is a case study of the relationship between ageing, the seaside, and heritage in which photographs and other visual referents are seen to be crucial resources for the construction of moral communities reflecting aspirations to return to an imagined past.

Under modernity the quest for belonging encounters a series of contradictions emphasising the fragility of such collective endeavours. Chapters 8 and 9 explore the tensions between the ageing individual and society. Chapter 8 focuses on the everyday world of later life as depicted in ethnographic and community studies. At what points does age matter and how do individuals and groups manage the transitions and crises of mid- and later life? If, as Thompson *et al.*'s detailed interviews suggest, older people do not feel old, then what are the

⁵⁸ A. Coleman and A. Chiva, *Coping With Change: Focus on Retirement* (London: Health Education Authority, 1991).

implications of having a young mind trapped within an ageing body?⁵⁹ Featherstone and Hepworth's concept of the 'mask of age' is considered as one attempt to understand this dilemma.⁶⁰ But if people are able to disguise their true age by means of cosmetic procedures, then does this act to camouflage the realities of ageing? And what happens when bodily betrayals (incontinence, mobility problems, dementias) force acceptance? The discussion examines some ways in which older people experience the status passages that signify movement from Third to Fourth Age. Whereas the shift from adulthood to retirement can be approached in ways similar to the upheavals of youth (adolescence and 'middlescence' both being characterised by liminality and identity crises), later transformations (entry into institutional care, living with dementias, dying) involve issues of communication breakdown between the older person and significant others. Important new work is beginning to interpret the uses of language both amongst older people and between them and their carers. Also, while the medical classification of 'confusion' implies failure to communicate, ethnographic studies have shown that such categorisation can inhibit understanding of the mechanisms of coping being developed by 'confused' older people. The meanings attached to home, family, and social network are critical to the preservation and reworking of identity. Clubs, friendship circles, grandparenthood, maintaining links with kin, and drawing upon the survival strategies used to deal with past transitions are considered in a range of settings, urban and rural, in which ageing individuals must adjust to changed social circumstances. Experiences of retirement migration and segregated living are also discussed.

A central question, given the constraints of economy, culture, and society, is: what motivates people to age as they do? For this reason I have chosen to conclude with a chapter that problematises biography. Biographies link personal understandings to specific actions. By definition they shift emphasis away from overarching theories towards contextualised ways of seeing. As members of particular cohorts, individuals provide insight into the cumulative experience of their age group, and indeed of their class-, race-, gender-, and place-bound cultures, but they also offer examples of discontinuity and difference. The suggestion that secularised modern societies are characterised by rootlessness and cultural amnesia renders problematic notions of

⁵⁹ P. Thompson, C. Itzin, and M. Abendstern, *I Don't Feel Old: The Experience of Later Life* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁶⁰ M. Featherstone and M. Hepworth, 'The mask of ageing and the postmodern life course', in M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth, and B. S. Turner (eds.), *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage, 1991), pp. 371–89.

memory, home, and community as repositories of meaning and identity for ageing individuals. Alongside the possible severance from a sense of the past lies a disruption of the orderly progression through predictable life-stages. But while it may be true that more people are living through a healthy, active retirement, thus stretching the bounds of mid-life, bleak reminders of the final phase of life continue to haunt us. This ghost of the future fuels a pursuit of agelessness which is also a retreat from the encounter with old age. The tension between continuity over time (at both social and personal levels) and fragmentation is the central pivot on which the conceptual argument hinges in chapter 9. Our understandings of ageing and the lived experience of it are socially constructed such that we regard the progress of individuals through time as a linear process guided by a series of 'markers' (stages marked by particular conventions and expectations). Whereas modernity has emphasised and made rigid these signposts and stages (via such formal impositions as mandatory retirement ages and informal expectations such as, say, dress codes), we are latterly witnessing a turn towards an apparently greater freedom of choice for the individual as these 'chronological bonds' are loosened. This may be characterised as a shift from the fixed life cycle which saw human ageing as akin to that of other animals (the 'ages of man') to the life course as an altogether more flexible entity dependent upon individual ways of negotiating a route through life. The conclusion thus sets biographical issues in the context of the contemporary shift from modernist social order to postmodern fragmentation. Contemporary contexts of social interaction challenge one's sense of fixed identity, and Kaufman's notion of 'the ageless self' runs up against the idea of self as malleable and multifaceted. Ageing is presented as a diverse phenomenon, first because this counterbalances the anachronistic, stereotyped assumption that all older people are alike and, secondly, to challenge the orthodoxy of grand narratives or one-explanation theories. However, underlying the diversity of ageing experiences are important historical continuities, not least pervasive economic inequalities between generations, and the bodily decrements of deep old age.

To reiterate: my reading of 'popular culture' is one that relates to cultural phenomena emanating from within the ageing populace, rather than simply mass media portrayals. While aiming to understand the interaction between the two, I am also concerned to explore the ways in which people manage their identities within a changing social system; hence the focus on the self and communication. Of course this does not mean that I am eschewing the requirement to provide a sustained theoretical thread. Nevertheless, one of the points I am trying to make is

that ageing is about social and cultural variety, and that it is unhelpful to present an argument that appears overly deterministic and ‘closed’. This is precisely the problem that has dogged gerontological theory-building in recent decades as a series of master-narratives have rather unsuccessfully succeeded one another. One thing we ought to have learned from Max Weber is that ‘social life and individual action are grounded in meaning: yet meaning is always and everywhere a cultural construct’.⁶¹ And, while culture is ubiquitous, it is also remarkably malleable, not to say elusive.

⁶¹ B. Martin, ‘The cultural construction of ageing: or how long can the summer wine really last?’, in M. Bury and J. Macnicol (eds.), *Aspects of Ageing: Essays on Social Policy and Old Age* (Egham: Department of Social Policy and Social Science, Royal Holloway and Bedford New College Social Policy Papers No. 3, 1990), pp. 53–81 (p. 54).