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# 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.



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More information



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.

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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.

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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.

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'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).

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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).

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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.

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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).

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'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 postmodernity 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.

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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).

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