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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# Ageing and popular culture

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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. 'Object-ivity' 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 incorpo-rated 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.

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persons in mid- and later life, and, as a conjoint aim, the better under-
standing 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 under-
standing 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 gener-
ously invited me to speak, and the BBC and Open University to broad-
cast. 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.

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