Volume 27 • No. 1/2020

JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF BRITISH CULTURES

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Age Matters: Cultural Representations and the Politics of Ageing

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Königshausen & Neumann

JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF BRITISH CULTURES (JSBC)

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Cover Image:
ArtistGNDphotography / iStock by Getty Image

You can visit the journal on the internet at http://www.britcult.de/jsbc/

Publisher:
Verlag Königshausen & Neumann GmbH, Leisenstraße 7, 97082 Würzburg,
Germany.

The *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* is published twice a year. The current price of an annual subscription is € 48.00. A single issue is € 32.00 (in each case plus postage).
Private readers are entitled to a discounted price for an annual subscription (€ 42.00 plus postage; copies and invoice will only be sent to a private address). In this case the publishers must be informed in advance that the Journal will be for private use only.
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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, alterungsbeständigem Papier
Umschlag: skh-softics / coverart

Printed in Germany
ISBN 978-3-8260-8059-3
ISSN 0944-9094
www.koenigshausen-neumann.de
www.libri.de
www.buchhandel.de
www.buchkatalog.de

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Volume 27 · No. 1/20

Why Age Matters (and Should Be of Concern to Cultural Studies)

Robert Troschitz (Dresden)

1. The Changing Landscapes of Ageing and Old Age

Like most Western societies, Britain is undergoing a major demographic change. For centuries, the proportion of the English population aged 60 or over had fluctuated between six and nine per cent (cf. Thane 2000: 20).[1] Declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy, however, have altered Britain's age structure. In 1966, the number of people aged 65 or older already made up 12.3 per cent of the population. It had climbed to 18.1 per cent by 2016 and is expected to rise to 26.5 per cent until 2066 (cf. Office for National Statistics 2018). This means that whereas for centuries every person aged 65 or over was matched by ten or more younger ones, the ratio was 1 to 7 in 1966, and it will be 1 to 2.8 by 2066. The most drastic increase can be seen amongst those aged 85 and over, whose number has grown from 0.4 million in 1966 to 1.6 million in 2016 and is predicted to stand at 5.1 million in 2066 (cf. *ibid.*).

As the challenges that this demographic change poses have become more and more visible, the topic of ageing has gained in prominence in public and political debates. In the political arena, the main concerns have, rather unsurprisingly, been economic and financial ones. The growing number of people in retirement unmatched by a similar rise of those in employment is seen as a severe challenge to the financing of state pensions – a challenge that the UK government has, for instance, tried to meet by steadily pushing up the pension age and by providing incentives to delay retirement.[2] Moreover, as more and more people require daily assistance and medical services, the UK, just like other Western countries,

[1] It is a popular belief that only very few people reached a high age in pre-industrial times. However, historical evidence offers a different picture. Though average life expectancy at birth was often not higher than thirty or forty years, the average is only so low because of the high infant and child mortality rates. Those who survived into early adulthood could expect to live into their fifties and had good chances of reaching 60 or 70 (cf. Shahar 2005: 71; Thane 2000: 19).

[2] The state pension age, currently 65 and reaching 66 in October 2020, will rise to 68 over the next decades. While early retirement is discouraged, delayed retirement is encouraged by increasing the state pension of those working beyond the retirement age by, currently, 10.4 per cent per year (cf. Foster 2018: 122-123).

Journal for the Study of British Cultures, Vol. 27/1 (2020), 3-15.
Verlag Königshausen & Neumann

faces a major 'care crisis' – a crisis that has not been alleviated by the predominance of a neoliberal outlook and the according cuts in public spending.[3]

The effects of the demographic change, however, go far beyond a mere economic and financial burden. The ageing of society has also transformed the meaning and experience of old age. The increase of the lifespan, greater physical fitness, health and a relatively good financial situation, compared to earlier centuries, have led to the emergence of a new 'stage of life' that is commonly referred to as the 'third age' and which Peter Laslett, who popularised the term, has defined as the "age of personal achievement and fulfilment" (1991: 4). With widened access to consumer products and the field of consumption becoming ever more central to the construction of personal identities, old age has supposedly turned into a matter of personal choice and individual lifestyles. The elderly are no longer "expected to don the retirement uniform" (Blaikie 1999: 73). Instead, they partake in highly competitive sports, explore foreign places, continue learning or do whatever it takes to enjoy life.

Although the opportunities and possibilities in old age have surely increased tremendously over the last decades, one needs to be careful not to overstate the liberating effects of the 'third age'. Many long-existing constraints of and negative attitudes towards ageing persist. Not only do class and gender continue to shape the experience of ageing, but ageism is widespread in Western societies. Despite government measures such as the UK's Equality Act of 2010, older people still face discrimination on the job market.[4] The beauty industry promotes 'anti-ageing' products and thereby presents ageing as undesirable and unwanted, and when it comes to healthcare, older people are often treated worse than younger ones (cf. Wyman *et al.* 2018). How deeply ageist attitudes and behaviours are engrained in contemporary society has recently been confirmed by a report of the Royal Society for Public Health which states that "ageism is the most commonly experienced form of prejudice and discrimination, both in the UK and across Europe" and that, in contrast to other forms of discrimination like sexism or racism, "ageist assumptions and attitudes often go unchallenged" (2018: 3).

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[3] In 2017/18, total net expenditure on adult social care from local authority funds was eight per cent lower than in 2010/11. As demand for care services has been increasing, spending per head has actually fallen by 17.5 per cent in real terms (cf. Age UK 2019: 6).

[4] The actual scope of ageism on the job market has been shown, for instance, by Drydakis *et al.* (2018). By sending out more than 1,700 pairs of matched applications (from a fictitious 28-year-old white British male and a 50-year-old white British male) to firms in the UK, they could show that older applicants have a more than 20 per cent lower chance of receiving an invitation to a job interview and that access to higher paid job vacancies is more difficult for older applicants.

Furthermore, 'old age' has come under the sway of a neoliberal governmentality. Welfare reforms have, for instance, centred around the idea of 'personalisation' with a concentration on individualised service provision and a "strong emphasis on individual responsibility for one's own well-being" (Lloyd *et al.* 2014: 329). Facing the problem of how to maintain prosperity in ageing societies, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development promoted the idea of "active ageing" and suggested "a shift in paradigms" that would "take account of the continuity of life" and enable older people "to lead productive lives in the society and economy" (1998: 84). In a similar way, the World Health Organization called for a policy framework that encouraged healthy and 'active ageing' and that would allow "people to realize their potential for physical, social, and mental well-being" and to continue "participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs" (2002: 12). How people age and what ageing means has become a social and political concern. Ageing is no longer just 'happening', but it needs to be 'actively' created in order to be 'positive' and 'successful'. The elderly are supposed to be 'productive' and 'socially useful' and are "expected to be able to carry on working for longer, to continue intellectually active and stay up to date, exercise their bodies and preserve their health, cultivate interests and activities and remain useful" (Mendes 2014: 182). Of course, the idea that a particular health regime and physical exercise may contribute to well-being in old age has been around at least since antiquity. However, today's active ageing policies are part of a neoliberal governmentality which has turned such forms of self-regulation and self-improvement into a social obligation (cf. Moulaert & Biggs 2013: 32-35). Ageing has become a process that is designed and crafted, and it requires self-control and discipline to age successfully and to act as an 'entrepreneur' of oneself and one's own ageing.

The 'third age' and its allies 'active' and 'successful' ageing have also intensified fears of ageing and strengthened forms of social exclusion, denigration and distress. According to Martha Holstein, "[t]he inability to measure up to the emergent norms of the Third Age reinforces an already existing problem and deepens the possibilities for negatively appraising one's life situation" (2011: 235). Retreating to the margins of society is no longer a viable option but a sign of "moral or personal failing" (Formosa 2013: 21). Moreover, the claim that old age can be actively fashioned and enjoyed has left its impact on the 'fourth age', that is the time of frailty and dependency. The prospect of ending up in a nursing home, suffering from dementia, bereft of agency, has become even more threatening since early old age has been remodelled in terms of the 'third age'. As Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs so aptly note, "[t]he brighter the lights of the third age, the darker the shadows they cast over this underbelly of aging – the fourth age" (2013: 372).

2. Studying Ageing and Old Age

The question "What is your age?" or, alternatively, "How old are you?" is one of the most ordinary questions and is asked a million times every day. Nevertheless, it is an interesting one especially if one considers the usual way of answering it. Some people might try to avoid a straightforward answer and claim that age does not matter or that they are as old as they feel, but in most cases the person asked responds by declaring the number of years that have passed since he or she was born. Without thinking about it, the logical answer when being asked about one's age seems to be to state one's chronological age. This, however, is only one way of defining age, and it is not the most helpful when trying to figure out, for instance, what 'old age' is. Though the ages of 60 and 70 have been used to mark a specific stage of life at least since medieval times (cf. Thane 2000: 24), there is no specific number of years that unequivocally defines someone as 'old'. Instead, age is often defined through means other than the number of years a person has lived. Age may be defined biologically through physical appearance and bodily characteristics, functionally as a person's fitness to perform certain tasks, psychologically with regard to a person's state of mind, socially in terms of behavioural norms as well as institutions and practices that compartmentalise the life course, such as retirement, and it may be understood culturally in the sense of the meanings and values that a culture assigns to certain people and that classify someone as 'old' (cf. Woodward 2006: 183; Iparraguirre 2018: 7-29). But not only can age be defined in multiple ways, ageing has also been investigated from various perspectives and with different academic disciplines involved.

The question of what causes the physiological process of ageing has been studied at least since antiquity. Aristotle, for example, regarded ageing as the result of the dwindling of the life force (cf. Mulley 2012: 226), and Galen of Pergamon, whose writings stayed influential well into the early modern period, argued that ageing was due to a loss of inner heat and moisture (cf. Schäfer 2015: 24-26). Theories of biological ageing have changed considerably since then, especially with the emergence of cellular and evolutionary theories in the 19th century and later molecular biology and the discovery of DNA (cf. Grignolio & Franceschi 2012). While the explanations of what causes ageing have altered over time, what has remained largely unchanged is the importance that has been attributed to the physiological and biological process of ageing and accordingly questions of longevity, health and care – questions that are at the heart of the discipline of geriatrics and that have shaped the development of gerontology in general.

Apart from a few early studies such as Charles Booth's *The Aged Poor in England and Wales* (1894), it was mainly in the second half of the 20th century that aspects of ageing other than the biomedical received greater attention. In the 1950s and in particular the 1960s, research into the psychology

of ageing gained considerable momentum (cf. Birren & Schroots 2001: 17-21). At the same time, ageing was also recognised as a phenomenon that had to be studied in relation to wider social structures (cf. Phillipson & Baars 2007: 70). One of the milestones of the development of social gerontology was Elaine Cumming and William Earl Henry's *Growing Old. The Process of Disengagement* (1961), which argues that ageing is "an inevitable, mutual withdrawal or disengagement, resulting in decreased interaction between the aging person and others in the social system he belongs to" (14). Though Cumming and Henry's 'disengagement theory' was soon criticised by those who supported the 'activity theory' and claimed that in order to age well older people ought to stay active in society, it started a process of sociological theorising and a more serious engagement with old age (cf. van Dyk 2015: 36-44). In contrast to the activity and disengagement theories, both of which were concerned with the individual's adjustment to society, critical gerontology and the political economy of ageing as they developed in the 1970s and 1980s interrogated social structures and stressed the 'structured dependency' of old age and its intersection with other systems of inequality such as gender or ethnicity (cf. Phillipson & Baars 2007: 78-79; van Dyk 2015: 51-53).

As the 'cultural turn' swept through the social sciences, a more explicitly cultural approach towards old age evolved from the 1980s onwards. The work of, amongst others, Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth (e.g. 1990, 1991, 1995), Andrew Blaikie (1999), Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs (e.g. 2000) shifted the focus onto the production and circulation of meaning, the body as a source of identity and patterns of consumption. At roughly the same time, a few humanities scholars began to explore old age and ageing. Literary gerontology, which first emerged in the 1980s, slowly established itself in the 1990s and 2000s with works such as Kathleen Woodward's *Aging and Its Discontents* (1991) (cf. Falcus 2015: 54-56), and, gradually, ageing has come to be studied from a variety of perspectives that take into account various forms of cultural production such as theatre, film or music. The turn towards culture could also be observed in the historiography of old age, which is no longer primarily concerned with socio-demographic issues but also studies the meanings of and attitudes towards old age (cf. Kampf 2015). Thus, over the last two decades, 'cultural gerontology' has emerged as a vibrant interdisciplinary field of academic enquiry that draws together work from the social sciences and the humanities.[5]

While covering a wide range of diverse interests, what unites the different approaches that make up cultural gerontology is the claim that ageing is not just a biological process but that, to use the words of Margaret Morganroth Gullette, "[h]uman beings are aged by culture" (2004: 12).

[5] A good overview is provided in Twigg & Martin (2015).

Culture, in other words, is recognised as being constitutive of age. Similarly, Gilleard argues that ageing is "a phenomenon that is inextricably caught up in and realized through social and cultural practices, much in the same way that such embodied entities as gender, race, disability, or sexuality are" (2014: 36). Cultural representations, therefore, play a crucial role because they "determine how we understand age and aging and influence the way we perceive others and define ourselves over the life course" (Kriebernegg & Maierhofer 2013b: 9). What ageing means and how it is perceived and experienced is neither something universal nor entirely individual but culturally constituted and inevitably enmeshed in a web of power relations. Accordingly, cultural gerontology explores, amongst others, the changing meanings and markers of age, attitudes towards old age including the prevalence of ageism, norms of behaviour as well as the modalities and complexities of embodiment. This type of academic enquiry may still be marginalised in mainstream gerontology, but it is a growing and exciting field to which this issue of the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* aims to contribute.

3. Old Age and Popular Culture

Contemporary consumer society is obsessed with youth. Advertising for anti-ageing cosmetics worships youth and spreads the message that ageing is something to be ashamed of. Similarly, the fashion industry adores youth. Even if the product is not specifically aimed at a young market, fashion advertising typically relies on young models and settings that "emphasise youthful zest" and thus perpetuates anti-ageing and ageist dynamics (Twigg 2015: 152). If older people are cast, they mostly appear in adverts for certain types of products such as food, health aids, pharmaceutical products and financial and insurance services, thereby "reflecting stereotypical expectations about behaviour and characteristics linked with older people as a social group" (Ylänne 2015: 370). The picture hardly changes if one looks beyond advertising at all kinds of media representation. In film, TV and other media, older people above the age of 50 are underrepresented relative to their respective share of the population – a situation that is even worse for those aged 65 and over (cf. *ibid.*). Older people, if they are present at all, "tend to be visually represented in minor, peripheral, or incidental roles" (Loos & Ivan 2018: 170). Although there has been a trend towards a more positive representation of older people, this trend only comprises the 'young-old', who, in tune with the normative appeal of the third age, are more frequently shown as enjoying life. The 'old-old' are still mostly invisible and "visually represented […] as possessing fewer positive attributes than the younger-old group" (*ibid.*). When it comes to the world of popular music, ageing and old age are not welcomed either. Though many heroes of past youth cultures did not, as Pete Townsend once hoped, die before they got old, this does not mean

that ageing is an issue that pop and rock music embraces. Instead, the likes of Mick Jagger are still performing the hits of their youth, thereby unwillingly displaying the struggles of ageing as a conflict between youth and old age. If ageing is actually a topic in popular music, negative depictions of old age predominate (cf. Kelly *et al.* 2016).

Though contemporary culture largely glorifies youth and is informed by rather stereotypical and often negative views of ageing, there are also examples of popular culture that actively engage with the problematics of ageing and old age. Of course, to a certain extent ageing has always played a role in cultural production. One may only think of fairy tales or popular myths and legends, in which wizards like Merlin are characteristically marked by old age, or works such as Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), which have explored various facets of ageing, including the fear of it. It seems, however, as if, in recent years, ageing and old age have come to occupy a slightly more prominent place in popular culture. Comedy-dramas like *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) and its sequel, which follow several British pensioners to India, as well as action films such as *RED* (2010), in which a group of retired secret agents gets back into action, have been box office hits. The list of popular films that thematise old age could easily be continued with *Grumpy Old Men* (1993), *Iris* (2001), *About Schmidt* (2002), *The Mother* (2003), *The Queen* (2006), *The Bucket List* (2007), *The Iron Lady* (2011), *Quartet* (2012), *The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* (2013), *Logan* (2017) or *King of Thieves* (2018) to name just a few. Even people as exceptional as Sherlock Holmes have eventually come to age when *Mr. Holmes* (2015) portrayed a 93-year-old Sherlock Holmes suffering from the first signs of dementia. Moreover, the Asterix series, whose characters have not aged for the last 60 years, has now taken up the topic of ageing in its latest film *The Secret of the Magic Potion* (2018). In a similar vein, several successful TV series have featured elderly protagonists. While *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992) is an early example, more recent series such as *Grace and Frankie* (2015-2020), *Vicious* (2013-2016) or *Last Tango in Halifax* (2012-2016) have explicitly dealt with ageing and old age, and the hidden camera programme *Off Their Rockers* (2013-2016) has humorously played around with stereotypes of old age. What all these films and TV series – and one could add dozens of works of prose fiction such as Julian Barnes's *The Lemon Table* (2004) or Howard Jacobson's *Live a Little* (2019) – do in one way or another is to explore what it means to grow old in contemporary society. Although the worshipping of youth is still dominant, ageing surely has come to be a topic in popular culture.