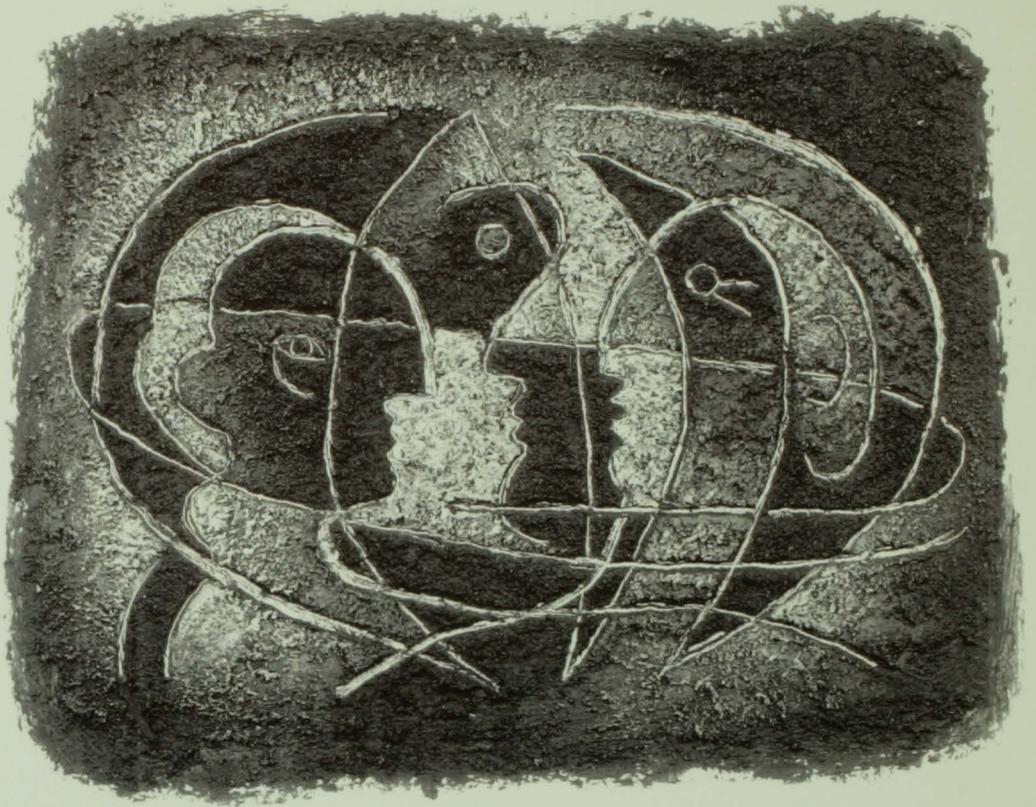


GAIL WILSON



understanding old age

CRITICAL AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

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critical and global perspectives

Gail Wilson



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*To the memory of Rachel Richardson and
James Richardson, my grandparents, Denise Shaw
and Betty Beard.*

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CHAPTER I

AN AGEING WORLD

One of the great successes of modern times is that in worldwide terms, more people are living longer, there are fewer early deaths and there is greater prosperity. Social security systems have allowed millions of older men and women to add a new life stage ('life after work' or post retirement) to the old model of youth, work and decay. In developing countries, longer lives mean older men and women go on working and contributing to economic and social development in ever growing numbers. If jobs are available, output is higher and there is the possibility of greater life-time productivity. This is especially true if the unpaid work done by older people is also taken into account. At present, only paid work is counted in world economic totals; however, reforms are on the way and soon many countries will have statistics for unpaid work as well as paid work (Murgatroyd and Neuburger, 1997). In most parts of the world the numbers of people of working age are increasing. They are usually better educated and healthier than in the past and their productivity may be higher. The population over pension age is growing (see Chapter 3), but the labour force is growing faster and there are no demographic reasons for an ageing crisis for many years to come. Democracy, which has often accompanied population ageing, raises the chances that wealth will be more widely shared.

Fear and rationality

Any such up-beat message about ageing will seem hollow to many people. Why be positive about more old people? Even the positive aspects of living longer are sometimes questioned, if living longer means being old for longer. This is not surprising because the fear of old age is part of our heritage and pervades our societies and our policies, as well as many aspects of our personal relationships with elders – or the lack of them. On the other hand, as inheritors of the Enlightenment, most Europeans and North Americans subscribe to ideals of equality, the rights of man (which theoretically now includes woman), freedom, and self-determination for all. Our ethical position is that elders (however we define them) have the same rights to a good quality of life as other adults. (Children still have fewer rights, though their position is changing.) In practice we know that equal rights for all are hard to come by. We live with the knowledge that most elders are disadvantaged in some way, and we (and they), take this as normal or even 'natural'.

Hopefully, readers of this book will already be convinced that the solution to old age is not to say, as one student announced in class, 'I think you should just line them up and shoot them'. Of course, he said he was joking, but was he? He was certainly expressing his own alienation from older people and the very deep fear of death and ageing that most of us feel. Given that ageing is an emotive subject for most Westerners, avoidance is one response. In America more and more people are involved in 'looking after' old people – in keeping them out of the way:

According to this perspective, those performing society's 'dirty work' with respect to the elderly would include legislators, social workers, Social Security administrators, nursing home entrepreneurs, psychiatrists and interpreters of pension guidelines to name just a few categories. These specialists in elderly care are akin to undertakers who protect Americans from their dead, only in this case the 'loved one' is conscious. (Williamson et al., 1982: 236)

The urge to help, sanitize or control those we fear, or who inspire disgust or loathing, has long been identified as one aspect of care. Carroll Estes (1979) has called us 'the aging enterprise' – we who research, write about or provide services for older people. How is it, she asks, that we make a living from 'helping' people who have probably not asked to be helped, and who may have no way of opposing our well meaning attentions. This is a fair question once we recognize that even the best intentions can have harmful outcomes: for example, care can always be interpreted as surveillance or labelling; and calling people 'old' when they are merely retired from paid work stigmatizes them unnecessarily.

There is also another ageing enterprise which is not there to help elders at all. The aim is rather to help the young fight off the 'burden' of the 'unproductive' old. Authors writing for this enterprise with titles like *Born to Pay: The New Politics of Aging in America* (Longman, 1987) or 'Why the Graying of the Welfare State Threatens to Flatten the American Dream – or Worse' (Howe, 1997) specialize in doom and gloom predictions of rising tides of crinklies and crumbles overwhelming social security systems (see Health Advisory Service, 1983) and dragging down national ability to innovate and compete. Perhaps even more pernicious, there are authors such as Callahan (1995) who present carefully reasoned philosophical arguments why money should not be spent on prolonging 'natural' lifespan. They represent the intellectual face of common-sense ageism which devalues older men and women and their place in society.

For policy purposes, the group characteristics of the elderly are as important as their individual variations. Those characteristics legitimate age based entitlements and welfare programs as well as social policies designed to

help the elderly maintain social respect. They could also be used to sanction a limit on those entitlements. (Callahan, 1995: 24)

And so to deny lifesaving, or even life enhancing, treatment to older men and women on the basis of age.

It is therefore fair to ask where this book stands. If writing about old age can itself run the risk of being ageist and may intensify the disadvantages of older people by labelling them as different from other adults, what can be the ethical justification of the book? And if ageing is contested, what is ageing and who are the old? There can be no definitive answers to these questions. There is bound to be dispute in a controversial and emotive area of understanding and knowledge. However, this book aims to improve knowledge of ageing and older people and so is a contribution to the first ageing enterprise. The following chapters oppose ideas that older people have 'had a good innings', or reached the end of their 'natural' lifespan, or that they are unproductive. I have assumed that later life is worth studying for its own sake, even though there are times when it is vital to assert a common humanity across all age groups. I also assume a value position that policies and practice should work towards giving old and young full citizenship rights and the 'capabilities they need to flourish' in Sen's terminology (Sen, 1993). Manifestly, there are few societies in the world where the majority of older women and men are flourishing and where old age is a time to look forward to, but this is no reason to assume that the disadvantages of later life are 'natural' or fixed. A decline in strength and a changing physical appearance may be inevitable in old age, but the degree and meaning of change are very variable. The actual impact of physiological changes depends on whether the environment is hostile to disabilities or supportive, as the disability lobby has so clearly shown (Morris, 1993). The cross-cultural approach to the study of ageing shows that most of the attributes of old age are culturally determined. For example, it is not 'natural' for older men or women to live in poverty, or to take care of grandchildren, or to spend time in religious contemplation, but it is easy to believe it is if we are locked into one culture only.

A principled stand against manifestations of ageism (Bytheway, 1995; Palmore, 1990) or the socially manufactured aspects of disadvantage is not the same as the certainty that the values of Western social gerontology are the only moral position. Katz (1996), for example, implies that all Western gerontologists are attempting to impose their own ways of seeing older people across the world. He quotes Cohen:

Both the 'universal' old person claimed by gerontology and the Western-derived agenda cited to solve her or his problem maintain a utopian stance, demanding state patronage incompatible with local economies and legitimating the state's shrugging of its shoulders. (Cohen, 1992 quoted in Katz, 1996: 3)

But there is no universal old person (see Chapter 2) and although collective action of some sort is essential for late life support, collectivities differ and countries are short of good policies.

The fact that this book is about old age does not mean that old age exists in any fixed or generalizable form. In a globalizing world, the meaning of old age is changing across cultures and within countries and families. Changes in all aspects of old age have been so great that Bourdelais, for example, says that popular understanding has lagged far behind (Hardy, 1997; Riley and Riley, 1994). We might even say the 'notion of aging has definitely had its day' (Bourdelais, 1998: 129). Certainly identities are becoming more fluid and less fixed as elders lose status in some cultures and gain a whole new lifestyle in others. We can start with some basic assumptions that underpin the arguments presented in the following chapters. Readers who are not interested in theory may like to skip to p. 13 for an outline of the book.

Language and meaning

Words like 'old' or 'old age' or 'pensioner' carry many meanings which are often implicit or even deliberately hidden. Does old age exist, and who for? For example, here we have to ask whether older people feel old and define themselves as old, or whether young people see them as separate and 'old'. What are the boundaries (if any) of old age? What is the nature of the boundaries (multiple, fixed, moveable, administrative, personal)? What are the experiences of being old? These words can be taken as unproblematic. For example old age is defined as beginning at 65 in many contexts, but that is to oversimplify and to obscure differences of meaning, power and culture. Many writers are happy to leave these stones unturned, and since much of what is said in the following chapters is based on the work of other authors, there are times when the complexities of meaning and power relations seem to disappear. At these times I would ask the reader not to lose sight of the many simplifications and hidden power relations that are involved. The aim must be to achieve a use of words which is 'good enough' for the aspect under discussion (Cohen, 1998) but which very possibly oversimplifies or homogenizes complex or diverse ideas or categories. This means that we should be aware that our terms and definitions are working tools which hide a vast range of taken-for-granted meanings and power relations.

Those who campaign as and for older people are aware of the problems of language. For example, 'old' is not a polite word for people in Western societies. In the English language we move from 'the old' to the hopefully more polite 'the elderly'. Both terms express the depersonalization and objectification that comes from defining people by a single

characteristic and lumping them together in one category, such as 'the' young, 'the' disabled. Next the static and homogenized 'old/elderly' can be compared with the less definitive and more personalized 'older people' or 'elder'. In France the shift has been from '*vieillard*' a masculine term used collectively to include women, to '*personne âgée*'. In America senior (citizen) is thought to be more polite. When the European survey organization Eurobarometer asked a sample of European elders what they liked to be called, 'senior citizen' came out top overall, but the label is rarely used in the UK, where 'older people' is more popular (Walker, 1993). These collective terms ignore differences in sex, class, ethnicity and age. In some cases they will be 'good enough': we may want to ignore differences or we may want to express the alienation and separation of older people from the rest of society, and so calling them 'the old' will be accurate.

Everyday language in Western cultures commonly confuses words that mark differences in *seniority* and terms which imply *disability*. The use of pension age to define 'older people' implies a seniority that is administratively defined. The healthy majority of pensioners in countries where the social security system delivers a 'retirement wage' (Myles, 1991) rarely think of themselves as old when they retire. The same is true in societies where a person is not old until they are disabled (Keith, 1994a). The status of 'clan elder' or older woman (mother-in-law or grandmother, for example) implies seniority not disability.

Seniority may also be associated with physiological changes. Balding or grey hair are traditionally associated with ageing and sometimes with wisdom. The menopause is a personal rather than a public change in the West, but in cultures where it is public, it can mark a time of new freedom and well-being for older women. These boundaries are markers of change but it would be hard to argue that they define 'old age'.

As with terms for ageing, simple approximations of words are often not 'good enough' for comparing social policies. Families, for example, are a mainstay of support in later life, but when policy makers speak of 'the family' (see Chapter 9) they may have very different activities and policy outcomes in mind. Governments range from believing that the family (and maybe a few Non Governmental Organizations – NGOs) will do everything needed to support an ageing population (parts of Africa), to providing a very high level of support to independent elders and caring family members (Denmark). And the 'family' may mean only spouse, children and grandchildren/great-grandchildren, or it may include a range of cousins, aunts and adoptive children (see Chapter 2). Gender relations and interpersonal expectations, standards of living, types of housing and daily activities, will all differ, and structure the basic idea of who family members are and what they should do for each other. A policy discussion that assumes uniformity will greatly oversimplify the issues.

In campaigning terms, there is a constant tension between the idea of older men and women as 'just like everyone else' and the idea of age-related difference. The concepts of universal human rights and the intrinsic worth of the individual are important when campaigning for equal rights or equal citizenship for older men and women. Some gerontologists and campaigners for better treatment for older people have therefore argued that the old are no different from other adults and that it is ageist to categorize older people as different (Bourdelaïs, 1998). A related argument is that older men and women who are frail or suffering from a disability should be treated first and foremost as disabled or frail rather than as 'old'. They should then have access to the same benefits as younger disabled men and women. Such discourses are useful when the aim is equality. Also, if 'the old' are not to be treated as 'the other', alien and, by implication, lower forms of life than the young, it becomes important to emphasize continuities over the life course and to blur the boundary between midlife and old age.

However, even in campaigning terms there are problems with approaches to ageing which deny difference. For example, differences in the position of men and women in society mean that policies that appear to be the same for both sexes act in different ways and have different gender outcomes. Outcomes will also differ *within* genders, by income, class, culture or health status, to consider just a few causes of difference (Gibson, 1996). In the same way, existing inequalities between young and old are only intensified by assuming equality across the adult life course in societies where age discrimination is part of the social structure. For example, as Townsend and others have pointed out (Estes, 1979; Phillipson, 1982; Townsend, 1981; Walker, 1980), enforced retirement ages, low pensions and prejudice against hiring older workers mean that incomes fall in later life for nearly everyone. It follows that structural change and/or positive discrimination in favour of older men and women are needed to increase equality in ageist societies. Legislation to outlaw age discrimination, and to ensure better work opportunities and better pensions is essential in nearly all countries. Just as few feminists would now rely wholly on a universalist approach to citizenship rights, with no distinction between men and women, so elders and their pressure groups need reforms that are specifically targeted at older men and women as well as universal reforms aimed at equality for all.

Social construction

The above approach to the language of ageing assumes that old age is socially and culturally constructed, as well as being manifested in bodily changes. The physiological and the social are often confused. They can even be combined, as when chronological age is used to define old age

and frailty as the same thing. The problem is compounded because in gerontology, unlike feminism, we have no equivalent of sex and gender to distinguish between biological and social ageing. Sex is a biological term, but gender is used in social science to mean the socially constructed characteristics of masculinity and femininity in different societies or periods of history (see Chapter 2). This lack of a word for the socially constructed characteristics of later life leaves a gap in the language of conceptualization that makes it very easy to think of biological and social ageing as the same thing. Just as sex used to be seen as a scientific measure of the 'natural' and 'wholly objective' differences between men and women, so biological characteristics of old age (physical ageing – wear and tear, slow-down of metabolic processes, etc.) are still widely seen as equally natural and incontrovertible. As Rubinstein says when criticizing this approach, "'biology" is our significant folk construct of aging but perceptions of aging are cultural so biology must be a cultural perception' (Rubinstein, 1990: 110). It then follows that the various socially imposed disabilities associated with old age in different societies can be seen as every bit as 'natural' as declining strength or slower metabolism. Since physiological decline is very variable, we may even come to think that social disadvantages are more 'inevitable' than biological ageing processes. Only death is indisputable but even here, the meaning of death and the emotions it arouses differ across age groups and cultures and between individuals.

Identity and 'the other'

For some people there is no boundary to be crossed into old age. They continue to think of themselves as the same as they have always been – but a little older. For others there are boundaries which are personal, and boundaries which relate to society. They may be chosen or imposed, and the chances are that they will rarely coincide. For example, a very long lived senior chief in a traditional African society may be quite happy to call himself old, he may be seen as old by others and he may belong to a group which would normally be defined and define itself, as old. There is no such agreement in ageist societies and we expect to contest or accept different aspects of ageing in different ways. 'I am old', 'You are old' and 'They are old' will have very different meanings depending on who is speaking, who to, or who they are talking about. Experiences of ageing can be disabling (we, who are old, cannot do this because we are old) or enabling (we, who are old, have experience and know better). Keith (1982) for example, records how residents in an old people's home translated being old into being collectively much more experienced than the young home manager. On the other hand, 'They are old' is a distancing mechanism. They are different or, in the language of Wilkinson

and Kitzinger (1996), they can be constructed as 'the other' (see also Titley and Chasey, 1996). The characteristics of the other are first, that they are not like us, second that they are not as varied as us and we do not have to take account of their individuality in the same way, and third, in the worst cases, they are not quite as human as us. It follows that separating older people from younger can depersonalize them and help to identify them as a weaker group and so increase their weakness.

The social construction of old age can be linked to changing ideas of identity in later life. The idea of a single, often stable, identity has now given way to the understanding that men and women can *sometimes* construct or choose a range of identities. Some of these identities will be imposed by others and some will be constructed by older people themselves. To take a concrete example, a young 60-year-old pensioner may join a pensioners' campaign group, or she may refuse on the grounds that she is not old and only old people belong to pensioners' groups (much more likely in the UK). Instead she may become a volunteer at a day centre, 'helping old people'. In these aspects of her life she is making her own choices about identity and its boundaries and contesting the definition that she is 'old'. In other spheres the choices are made for her. Family or friends may regard her as young or old, largely it seems, depending on her appearance and vitality and their own age or family position. To her grandchildren she will surely be 'old'. Her children may think she is 'still young', something that is not quite the same as 'young', and her older friends and relatives may genuinely see her as young. Whatever she and her friends think, the state will have identified her as a pensioner. In the UK in 2000 she will either draw her pension or be required to write in saying she is deferring it. At 75, however fit she is, her GP will attempt to check up on her health.

In the above example, the boundaries of later life are being defined differently by different individuals and social structures. They are being accepted or contested in different ways, and within the boundaries the meaning of old age differs, so being a pensioner is one thing, and being a volunteer helper is another. The example also shows that at 60 or 65 in prosperous Western countries it has become very easy for large numbers of people to contest the boundary of old age, but at 80 it can be much more difficult. As one woman said: 'I didn't feel old until I had my 80th birthday. Then I thought, well 80 is old isn't it. It has changed my attitude a bit' (author's interview).

Social policy

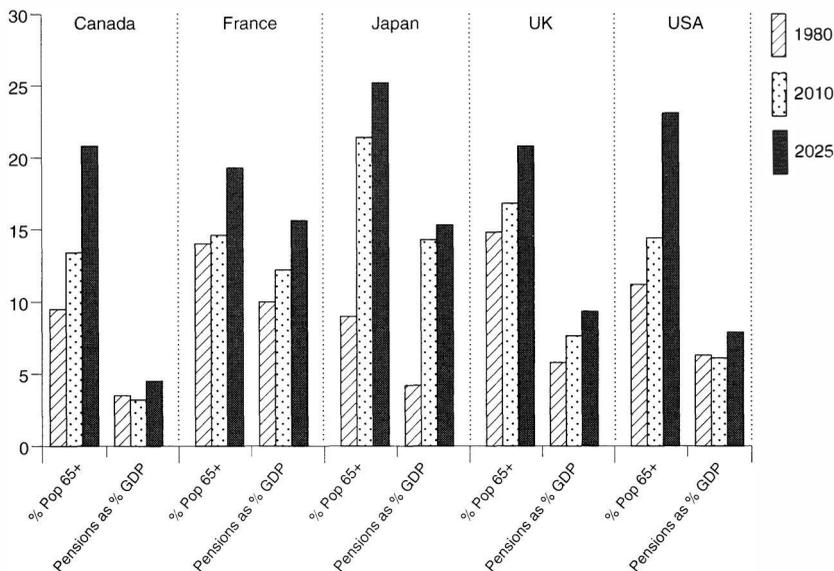
When social policy is considered from the point of view of older people it is hard to subscribe to the prevailing market-led orthodoxy. Competition in a market economy leads to poor outcomes for those who

lack economic resources – most notably older men and women, but also any other individuals or groups who cannot find paid work. Economic policies are often presented as rational and inevitable but, given the power structure of society, these so-called inevitable choices usually end up protecting younger age groups and resulting in unpleasant outcomes for those in later life (cuts in pensions or charges for health care). The ‘facts of life’ about ageing populations are the stuff of media reports. Wherever we are, it is easy to believe that all societies, but particularly our own, are facing a rising tide of elders whose care is going to be too great for the changing family (i.e. women) to cope with, and whose pensions cannot be paid. The fact that hard evidence for these myths is either nonexistent or inconclusive appears to have had no effect on public perceptions, and barely impinged on the minds of policy makers. Until research is done on why this should be so, we can only conclude that it is the result of an emotional fear of ageing and the ease of scapegoating a weak group. It certainly prevents a more informed approach to policy-making.

Discussion of social policy in gerontology usually moves into a doom and gloom exposition of demography at this point. A look at the figures suggests that something more is needed. As Figure 1.1 shows that there is very little relation between the increase in the population of pension age and the share of national income devoted to state pensions. In 1980 the over 65s were 15 per cent of the population in the UK and state pensions cost 6 per cent of GNP. These percentages had risen massively since 1908 when the first state pensions were paid in the midst of predictions of imminent bankruptcy. The welfare state has not only failed to collapse under the burden, but has expanded massively. In France in 1980 much the same proportion of people were over 65 (14 per cent), but pensions were 10 per cent of GNP. In both countries there were scares about the unsustainability of pensions. However, the French system was already paying out more in 1980 than was projected for the UK in 2025. In the USA the figures were 11 per cent over 65 and with pensions of 6 per cent of GNP. Looking forward and taking the International Monetary Fund’s highest projections for 2025, the increases shown in Figure 1.1 do not appear unsustainable in any country, despite the continuing variety in numbers of elders and amount of pension paid. UK pensions were projected to rise to 9 per cent of GNP (an increase of 3 per cent in GNP share over 45 years). In France and the USA the bill was projected to rise to 16 per cent and 8 per cent of GNP respectively (with populations over 65 rising to 19 per cent and 23 per cent). Although the projections indicated that the cost of pensions in the USA would be only half as much in GNP share as in France, the so-called pensions crisis has received more attention in the USA than in France. It is clear from these figures that a change in the number of elders can always be used to create a moral panic and as justification for retrenchments in welfare spending.

Figure 1.1 Projections for population over 65 and per cent GDP spent on public pensions, selected countries

Source: Calculated from Heller et al. (1986).



It is also clear that the actual figures for the number of older people or the cost of their pensions vary so widely that rational policy-making appears to be non-existent. Fear or political expediency rules, not rationality.

Theorizing ageing

The theoretical approach underpinning this book is that age is socially constructed and one aim is to deconstruct superficial and biased knowledge of ageing. Another is to analyse the problems of later life and the ways that the 'old', however defined, are constructed as alien or 'other'. Most theories of ageing take a more straightforward view of later life. Over large parts of the world the 'golden age' theory of ageing prevails – once elders were respected, looked up to and cared for by their families in traditional, stable societies. Now things are not so good. In times past older people were believed to be nearer to God or the Gods than the young, and their behaviour and place in society was meant to reflect this. Wisdom, spirituality and magic powers were seen as attributes of long experience or nearness to death. Now the spread of materialism, industrialization, urbanization and Westernization have