

Aging and Aging Studies: Celebrating the Cultural Turn

Chris Gilleard

A new journal stressing the investigation of age and aging through the humanities and the arts can only be welcomed, not least for providing later life with fresh opportunities to be other than it is. By taking an explicitly cultural approach toward aging, the journal illustrates the truism that there are many ways of approaching and understanding age beyond the bio-psycho-social framework that dominates already existing gerontology. The humanities and the arts—and cultural studies more broadly—offer ways of thinking about age and aging differently.

In contrast to old age, which is a status or social category conferred on individuals at a particular chronological age and/or as the result of a particular combination of physical signs and social markers, aging is a more diffuse process that is expressed in and through change. While the society of what Bauman calls “liquid modernity” flirts with the idea that change—personal, physical, social change—is fluid, plastic, and polysemous, the processes of aging seem to offer a rebuke to such postmodern posturing. For they imply a clear direction of travel, one that moves from young to old, from a life opening to the future to a life that is closed by the past. But if aging’s direction of travel has long been thought of as inexorable, governed by a mortality predetermined by nature, an alternative possibility has persisted, of human beings changing that direction—halting or even reversing it.

This dilemma between acceptance and rejection of age as a master identity or an essential, unmediated biological process is certainly not new. It becomes again more salient, however, when a new direction is taken such as the appearance of a new journal, particularly one that lies outwith the traditional fields of gerontology. Can aging be studied in a manner that avoids treating it as a predetermined process, seeking at best to reveal its secrets, or otherwise charting its pathways or observing its

consequences? Is aging a structuring structure, some process or processes that affects us, diminishes us, and ultimately finishes us, leaving open only the manner of our aging? Or is it possible to study aging otherwise, as contested nature? Aging studies, it can be argued, must engage with such issues, not least because of the increasing quantity and variety of human aging about.

While it often seems to be the case that aging is fundamentally a matter not just of change but of decline in physiological competence, albeit addressed in different ways and at different times, the cultural turn in the social sciences has begun to interrogate such essentialism. The cultural turn has sought to articulate a view of aging—or at least of human aging—as 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. Such a perspective puts what may be termed a rather queer light on gerontology, the historically located interdisciplinary subject area that has arguably over-essentialized age as its object of study: age as both cause and consequence, the topic in textbooks of “adult development” that is placed in the chapter just before death and dying.

Aging studies—viewed with this broader cultural studies framework, at least—pursues a different agenda, critically interrogating—“queering,” if you like—its older and more established academic partner, gerontology. Unlike gerontology, aging studies is still young, still open to future developments. Within this openness, of course, lies danger, particularly the danger of an excess enthusiasm for the fluid, plastic, and performative possibilities of age. Is it really only the state that makes our date of birth an unchanging aspect of our identity? Is it only the market that tricks us into fearing growing old? Is it just the operation of bio-politics that divides up our lives into distinct sequences? However critically we interrogate the social and cultural construction of ageing and agedness, can we risk ignoring the corporeal systems we have in common with other living beings?

Whether aging arises from our genes or despite them, our conceptualization of growth and decay is dominated more by images of the

ripening and rotting of fruit and vegetables than it is by observing such processes in other animals. Aging in the wild is rare. It contributes little to “natural” mortality. Even interpreted as a biological process, human aging is only realized within a social and cultural context, expressed and made salient through its embodiment within the social. Human longevity, it can be argued, is as much a consequence of the complexity and inter-connectedness of our social institutions as it is of our genome. Hence, changing the social and cultural imaginary of age, changing its practices and performativity, can do more than change the way we think about aging. It can change age itself. I look forward to this new journal as offering a new opportunity to do just that, to help us all age differently.

WORK CITED

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity, 2000.

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