The Coming of Age Studies

Lynne Segal

It is almost forty-five years since Simone de Beauvoir published her weighty book on old age, *La Vieillesse* (1970). An extraordinary book for its time, its opening page reveals that Beauvoir was repeatedly warned not to write it, confirming her fear that even mentioning "old age" was culturally taboo. Indeed, the topic was so forbidden that her title, "Old Age," appeared in English under the euphemistic title, *The Coming of Age* (1971). It was indeed a gloomy book, comprehensively detailing the enduring cultural contempt for the elderly, rendering so many of them—women and men alike—vulnerable, wretched, and isolated, if not abject.

Times change, as I explore in my own work, *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing*; in relation to views of old age, however, they change rather slowly. This stubborn persistence of prejudice against the elderly was the trigger for the rise of age studies. Scholars such as Margaret Morganroth Gullette, who first called for "Age Studies" in the 1990s, hoped the field would explore all the ramifications of negative attitudes towards aging: "How can we ever have thought we age by nature alone?" (137). She was quickly joined by other feminist scholars in the USA, such as Kathleen Woodward, who noted that "ageism is entrenched within feminism itself" (xi). This would explain why Beauvoir's own book on old age was ignored by feminists when it first appeared, despite her unique influence on second wave feminism. Age studies, however, aims to address the whole of life, even though many scholars in the field have sought above all to affirm the diversity, significance, and challenge of old age. In any case, understanding the paradoxes of old age means tackling how we always struggle throughout our lives to become, and remain, the person we feel "we are," striving to retain some sense of selfhood and agency, although such efforts encounter different challenges across a lifetime. In western societies especially, we find ourselves early on directed to become, and above all to remain, autonomous, independent,

future-oriented individuals. Such teaching, with its disavowal of so much about our human vulnerabilities, passivity, interdependence, and mortality, can only shore up trouble for the future. It ensures that all too soon, our registering of aging is likely to prove a perplexing, even frightening, affair.

The global population is itself getting older, longevity having increased by around 30 years—a whole generation—over the twentieth century. However, the increasing number of old people has done little to shift the ubiquitous cultural celebration of youth. Rather the contrary, with generational tensions heightened by popular writers, such as Martin Amis, deploring the growing army of "demented very old people" and the threatening "silver tsunami" (Davies). Such prejudices are incited despite, and also partly because of, much professional rhetoric encouraging practices of "aging well" and suggesting that through exercise, healthy eating, and more, we can remain fit and energetic to the end of life. Most older people, when interviewed, say that they "don't feel old"; the older they are, the younger they often claim to feel. "How can a 17-year-old, like me, suddenly be 81?" the developmental biologist Lewis Wolpert asks in his book on the surprising nature of old age, wryly entitled *You're Looking Very Well* (1). This suggests to me, first of all, the continuing stigma associated with being "old" (seen in terms of fragility and above all "dependency") and the lack of any language for affirming old age, other than to suggest it varies little from being young. However, in *Out of Time*, I suggest that the negativity leading us to disavow aging also comes from a certain "temporal vertigo" that many of us experience around aging (4). Given the oddities of psychic life, we easily feel a host of different ages at the very same time—being "'all ages and no age" is, for instance, how the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott described the timelessness of the unconscious (23). Looking, as best we can, at the psychic continuities and discontinuities that connect us across time renders us all, in some sense, "time-travelers," all the more so the older we get.

A critical plank of age studies needs to be the recognition that "dependency" is part of the human condition, whatever our age. We only gain any sense of ourselves through our ties to others; yet, it is just those ties

of dependence that we tend to repudiate upon entering adulthood. The idea that "dependence" may be a collaborative process is rarely addressed. Least acknowledged is that old people in need of care, much like young dependent people, might give back as much as they receive: a situation best captured through notions of interdependency. In my own writing, I am also concerned with ways of addressing loss and mourning. Here, in contrast with those now eagerly promoting what has been called the "happiness industry" (Segal 197-99), it seems necessary to acknowledge the inevitability of grief, pain, and conflict in human affairs, seeing them as part of what it means to lead a full life, even what we might call a "good" life. Refusing to evade the inevitability of sorrow helps us to see that dealing with the tragic aspects of life has its own distinct significance. As psychosocial theorist Stephen Frosh suggests: "Perhaps we should never be able to answer the question 'Are you happy now?' in the affirmative, if we really want to use feelings to construct the good life" (Wolpert 56).

My own work also explores the ways in which aging is gendered, especially in the life of desire. Much of men's writing, popular and scholarly, such as that of Philip Roth in almost all his recent fiction, or Elliott Jaques, from the clinic, depicts the distinct phallic faultlines of aging and the narcissistic mortification when the penis begins to "let them down"; post-Viagra, "erectile dysfunction disorder" is the "illness" this feeling has spawned. One thing older men rarely mention is the waning of desire. This contrasts significantly with some of the most popular women's voices speaking of aging—from Germaine Greer onwards—emphasizing the delights of being post-sexual: "To be unwanted is to be free" (2-4). Similar sentiments appear in the work of other well-known feminists, such as Gloria Steinem, and from the United Kingdom, influential advice-givers such as Irma Kurtz; popular scholars writing on old age, including Jane Miller; and the writer and journalist turned stage performer to spread her message, Virginia Ironside. Such apparent gender contrast suggests to me the need for age studies to look again at what we mean by aging sexuality, and what forces of social rejection might lead older women to feel safer disowning any signs of desire even though,

being linked to memory, certain aspects of desire are likely to be timeless.

Finally, despite public attempts to keep us all securely in our age bands, evident in recent public trashing of "Baby Boomers" now entering old age, one great resource of age studies is its promotion of communication across generations. Age studies opens spaces where the old and young can converse, without the need to negate the differences (or the similarities) across generations. This can only be a good thing.

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