

# Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*: The Humanities and Gerontology's Diagram of Science

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Anybody familiar with Simone de Beauvoir's book, *La Vieillesse* (*Old Age*, 1970), or the English version entitled *The Coming of Age* (1972), is also aware that a bold *tour de force* by one of the world's great critical writers has been neglected by feminists, humanists, gerontologists, historians, and philosophers alike. Comparisons to Beauvoir's influential *The Second Sex* abound because where that text became a universal anchor of the feminist canon, *The Coming of Age* seemed more peripheral than central and unknown to the many students who handily quote *The Second Sex* as second nature. In an interview, Beauvoir was asked if she thought her book "will do for the elderly what *The Second Sex* did for women." She answered, "Yes, that's what I envisioned. I wanted to think about [the subject of] aging in all of its aspects the way I did [the subject of] woman" ("This Site's"). So what happened? Several writers, such as Roberta Maierhofer, claim that the book's neglect reflected a general feminist neglect of aging. Concerned with the challenges and injustices of young to mid-life issues, feminist research seemed to have little patience with Beauvoir's ambivalent reflections on growing older. Furthermore, where feminists did engage with the book, they also criticized its preoccupation with the aging experiences of older men or what Silvia Stoller terms its "gender-indifferent" focus (6). And while it is true that Beauvoir never discusses *The Second Sex* in *The Coming of Age*, neither has the task of drawing out her obvious parallels between ageism and sexism, nor the myths of "woman" and "old age" (see Weiss) been taken up by others.

Other gerontological humanists, such as Kathleen Woodward, have noted that Beauvoir's book has been bypassed even by her followers because of its negative portrayal of old age. One reason why the book actually went out of print was because reviewers attacked its "unrelievedly pessimistic view of aging" (Woodward 32). Beauvoir, writing the book at sixty-two, did indeed emphasize the powerlessness and hopelessness which accrue to older people, partly because of physical frailty but largely due to their social isolation and marginalization. However, as Anne Wyatt-Brown points out, publishers in the 1970s were looking for more heroic themes and good-news stories about older people. In the America of Robert N. Butler, *The Coming of Age* appeared to be out of time and out of place, saturated with Beauvoir's own anger and misgivings about the aging process. While Beauvoir's life after the book was published and until her death in 1986 at the age of seventy-eight was healthy and filled with confident writing and vigorous projects, her views on aging would be fixed to the pessimism with which the popular gerontological literature characterized *The Coming of Age*. Hence, Beauvoir's theoretical writing strategy to mediate and illuminate the intellectual and political tensions among Marxism and phenomenology, literary and empirical studies, and historical and anthropological explanations of humanity, was subsumed under a dismissive reception that condemned the book to ageism, sexism, and pessimism (see Maierhofer).

With regard to the contents of *The Coming of Age*, more problems emerged, according to the critics who considered it a poor fit or a non-fit within mainstream disciplines. For example, gerontologists Beverly Ovrebo and Meredith Minkler, while praising the book, position it as straddling political economy and the humanities since Beauvoir is "neither strictly a Marxist nor a 'pure' existentialist" (290). Historians of aging considered the book not quite historical enough, and no doubt anthropologists were not impressed with Beauvoir's sweeping colonial-era ethnocentric surveys of the world's non-Western peoples. Among philosophers, the reaction has been more mixed. On

the one hand, *The Coming of Age* is commended for at least promoting a philosophical focus on aging; Jan Baars says the book is only the second major philosophical work on age after Cicero wrote *On Old Age* in 44 BC (3). On the other hand, *The Coming of Age* is criticized for not really being a work of philosophical scholarship. As Helen Small remarks, Beauvoir is characteristically treated as a political agitator on behalf of the old (a problematic one, given her emphasis on decline) and as a memoirist and social commentator on old age, but not as a philosopher, with a specific conception of what life is, of how lives accrue and sustain meaning, and of philosophy's relationship to politics (2). Overall, the critical legacy of *The Coming of Age* has situated the book as deficient, in one way or the other, in tackling the problems of aging in a modern and meaningful way.

However, an original new book of essays entitled *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age*, edited by Silvia Stoller, renews the question of Beauvoir's philosophical contributions to age studies. The essays map the book across a rich terrain of ethics, intersectionality, temporality, embodiment, and subjectivity and explain Beauvoir's work in relation to Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, Sartre, and others. The book makes it clear to me that critical and feminist gerontology texts such as Laura Hurd Clarke's *Facing Age* (2011), Frida Furman's *Facing the Mirror* (1997), Marilyn Pearsal's *The Other Within Us* (1997) and John Vincent et al.'s *The Futures of Old Age* (2006), all echo Beauvoir's phenomenological insistence that the young see the old in themselves. Her assertion that, "If we do not know what we are going to be, we cannot know what we are: let alone recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman" (12), would belong in all these and many other gerontology texts. Indeed, most of the gerontological literature that promotes a subjective dimension or looks at the "inside" of aging owes something to Beauvoir's radical vision, despite Beauvoir's own ambivalence about aging (see Segal 6-11). Perhaps, as Roberta Maierhofer and Silvia Stoler suggest, *The Coming of Age* was not really behind but actually ahead of its time.

While the review of Beauvoir's contribution is an important project of its own, here I wish to move on from the debates about Beauvoir's status as an age studies scholar to think about the status of *The Coming of Age* in gerontology as a humanities text, since the relationship between the humanities and gerontology is a key matter in the development of age studies. In previous work (1996, 2000), I have explored gerontology texts as practices of authority that have legitimized the discipline and constituted its subjects. My concern has been pragmatic in questioning what texts do, as well as what they say. Andrew Achenbaum, in his history of gerontology (1995), has pointed out that only those texts that *appear* to be scientific have been granted foundational status. The most common example of these which both Achenbaum and I cite is Edmund V. Cowdry's *Problems of Ageing* (1939), a multi-authored text proclaimed as the first to give the appearance of coherence to the gerontological field by extending a medical style of thought to it.

To reiterate and summarize my critical review, in the preface to the second edition of *Problems of Ageing* (1942) Cowdry establishes the text's credentials: it was based on research presented at the Woods Hole Conference (Mass.) in 1937 (one of the first major scientific conferences on aging) and sponsored by The Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation, the Union of American Biological Societies, and the National Research Council. Cowdry tells us in the handbook's original preface (reprinted in the second edition) that "the opportunity to bring to bear on the problem [of ageing] the experience and points of view of many specialists, working together in a constructive way, has been unrivaled" (iii). Lawrence K. Frank, who would go on to become a leader in American gerontology and in the Gerontology Society of America, corroborates Cowdry's scientific optimism, saying, "It is evident that the problem of the ageing process is multi-dimensional and will require for its solution not only a multidisciplinary approach but also a synoptic correlation of diverse findings and viewpoints" (xv). The introduction to *Problems of Ageing* was written by American philosopher John Dewey, who, elderly himself

at this point, saw in the study of aging an important opportunity to link biological and cultural explanations, creating a new form of knowledge. In particular, this would be a knowledge where “science and philosophy meet on common ground in their joint interest in discovering the processes of normal growth and in the institution of conditions which will favor and support ever continued growth” (xxxiii). With this sentiment, Dewey set the tone for a gerontological challenge that went beyond Cowdry’s text, while contextualizing its optimism within its multidisciplinary design at the same time.

Following Dewey’s introduction are thirty-four chapters organized according to anatomical models, dense with comprehensive inventories and tables that catalog the special circumstances of old age. The last two chapters reiterate the importance of multidisciplinary and professionalism to the project of gerontological knowledge-production. In the final chapter Edward J. Stieglitz—who as a physician conceived the idea of “social gerontology”—gives multidisciplinary gerontology a final metaphorical linkage between human and social bodies, saying that, “As the cell is the unit from which the elaborate structure of the human body is constructed, so are individual men and women the basic units of collective society, the body politic” (895). Overall, *Problems of Ageing* is a marvellous collection bound together by the organizational flow of the contributors list, Cowdry’s preface, Dewey’s compelling introduction, the progressive chapter order, the multidisciplinary agenda, and the scientific vocabularies, all united in bringing the aspirations of modern science to the problems of aging. Thus the Cowdry-style handbook set a genre standard for how gerontological knowledge should appear in the handbooks that followed up to the present.

Before returning to Beauvoir, let’s briefly compare *Problems of Ageing* with the reception of G. Stanley Hall’s earlier book *Senescence: The Last Half of Life* (1922), another key text which I have discussed in an earlier work (*Disciplining Old Age*; “Reflections on the Gerontological Handbook”). Hall was a major figure in American psychology and, along

with William James, Hall modernized older intellectual traditions, first as a psychology professor at Johns Hopkins University and later as the President of Clark University. Influenced by European thinkers such as Freud and Jung (whom he brought to lecture at Clark in 1909), Hall's theoretical approach to psychology earned him the praise of James, who wrote of him that "he has too complicated a mind!" (qtd. in Ross 241). Hall is also famous for coining the term "adolescence," and his 1904 book on this topic is considered its first professional treatment. However, Hall's work on old age, written during his retirement from Clark University in 1920, was hardly as influential as *Adolescence*, nor has it ever become a part of the gerontological canon. Like Beauvoir, Hall was ambivalent about aging and about science, or, put another way, about the authority of science to encompass all the problems of aging (that is, Cowdry's project). In *Senescence* Hall takes on arguments from religion, debates nature and nurture, sources popular and academic materials, and moves between conservative and radical politics. Like *The Coming of Age*, *Senescence* traffics in several different interdisciplinary epistemologies, and as Dorothy Ross, Hall's biographer, notes, "Hall's double-dealing is a marvellous revelation of the complexities of his age; his thought picks up and exposes intellectual and cultural conflict" (xiv). Although Hall was more optimistic than Beauvoir about the aging process and less politically fired up about it, he was also fully aware of the calamity of aging in the industrial era (an aspect of Hall's work about which Thomas Cole has written with illuminating insight).

But what intrigues me is that Hall tried to expand gerontology into psychological territory not just through science, but also by looking to the humanities—especially poetry, fiction, and autobiography—to articulate a subjective, personal dimension. His book also wanders rather than stabilizes; it seems over-personalized and ambivalent rather than certain about the connections among aging, science, and modernity. Above all, it advocates for a new gerontology that includes critical thinking and subjective reflection, a departure from the work of



Hall's medical colleagues. For all these reasons, Hall's work falls outside the gerontological canon. His multidisciplinary is not the science-dominated one offered by Cowdry. But in fact his genre-mixing style demonstrates the contradictory nature of gerontology itself: a science that attempts to discipline an impossible diversity of phenomena into a unitary form of knowledge.

So, I enjoy reading Hall's book because it does not fit, which is the same reason I think we should read Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*. Both are messy accumulations of philosophical, artistic, literary, autobiographical, sociological, and economic matters; both are unsure of what aging means; both express their authors' contradictions about aging; yet both advocate for radical change. Other early gerontologists did not necessarily disregard the humanities or philosophical traditions around aging. For example, Élie Metchnikoff, the renowned medical researcher at the Pasteur Institute in Paris who coined the term "gerontology," devotes an entire section of his 1907 book *The Prolongation of Life: Optimistic Studies* to Goethe and *Faust*. Metchnikoff says that he must read *Faust* "because in addition to the biographical details in *Faust*, there are many ideas that illuminate the poet's concept of life. Goethe's life explains *Faust*, and *Faust* explains the soul of its author" (283). Yet it is Metchnikoff's research on bacteriology and cellular degeneration, not his exegesis of *Faust*, that put him into the gerontological canon.

How then can we understand this relationship of knowledges in aging between periphery and center as a relationship between texts on aging? I think that Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "diagram" provides an interesting direction. Deleuze, in several writings, but particularly in *A Thousand Plateaus* (co-authored with Félix Guattari), maintains that a diagram is an assemblage or "abstract machine" of forces whose power lies in a design that expresses truth. And diagrams do this by creating a sense of resemblance between contingent or unrelated elements, playing what Deleuze calls "a piloting role" that "does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a

new type of reality” (142). For example, in his book *Foucault*, Deleuze considers the Panopticon in Foucault’s work as a kind of diagram. Diagrams also connect to other diagrams, such that “from one diagram to the next, new maps are drawn” (44). I find interesting parallels between the Deleuzian concept of diagram and textual genres in scientific fields, because both bring together contingent knowledges, vocabularies, worldviews, and rhetorical practices as disciplinary relays that express truth. They are diagrammatical before they are textual, or anything else. The question of why the diagram of Cowdry’s text, but not Hall’s, nor Beauvoir’s, becomes a design of truth and in fact the diagram for an entire industry of gerontological handbooks and canonical texts, leads to a wider critique of the intellectual capital and literary materialization of the human sciences.

Deleuze says that “there is no diagram that does not also include, besides the points which it connects up, certain relatively free or unbound points, points of creativity, change and resistance, and it is perhaps with these that we ought to begin in order to understand the whole picture” (44). Hence the diagram of the gerontological textbook, firmly entrenching the field’s science, multidisciplinary, and positivity, also opens up these anchors as entry-points for critique at the same time. Perhaps this aspect of the diagram best captures Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age*: that while it may not be a great book for many of the reasons pointed out by its critics, its peripheral and radical status provides a symbolic entry-point, an anti-diagram of an outlaw design, from which to view the center from a peripheral distance “in order to understand the whole picture.”

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