

Critical Questions for Ageing Societies, by Gemma M. Carney and Paul Nash. Bristol: Policy Press, 2020. Pp. 234, £24.99 (paperback).

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While in the fields of critical, cultural and humanistic gerontology scholars have been highly skeptical of widespread concerns about “population ageing”, an “alarmist demography” (Katz 2002) (see also Katz 2022 in this issue) continues to dominate both political and cultural discourses in the global north, and increasingly in the global south.

Addressing contemporary concerns about “population aging,” *Critical Questions for Ageing Societies* challenges dominant understandings of demographic changes in terms of a “demographic time-bomb” (18). Approaching the topic from a poststructuralist perspective, the book interrogates how older age and aging are socially constructed through cultural and political discourses and concludes that “the problem is not aging itself, it is that we use age to structure social, economic and political life in a way that is neither efficient nor effective” (7). A feminist approach is distinct throughout the book in ways that foreground gender, other inequalities, and their intersections. Focusing on the social and political contexts of the UK and USA, the book offers a solution-based approach, suggesting practical strategies directed toward restructuring society and the welfare system, with a concentration on rising to the challenges – and embracing the opportunities – resulting from contemporary demographic changes. For example, they suggest that policy focused on ‘extending working lives’ needs to provide attractive opportunities for older workers, as well as tackle ageism in the workplace. Another suggestion is to create more effective partnerships between public and private care providers, as well as to move away from a regional care strategy to a national one in order to provide consistency in, and equal distribution of, care.

Structured as a textbook for an undergraduate audience, the book is divided into self-contained chapters that address some of the questions students have asked the authors over the years, such as: “All old people are pretty much the same, aren’t they? (Ch. 5),” “Why do older people have it so good? (Ch. 7),” and “Will I ever have enough money to retire? (Ch. 3).” The topics of the chapters are population aging (Ch. 1), ageism and ageist stereotypes (Ch. 2), retirement and active aging (Ch. 3), elder care (Ch. 4), diversity in the older population (Ch. 5), gender and aging (Ch. 6), the myth of generational conflict (Ch. 7), political demography (Ch. 8), and cultural gerontology (Ch. 9), with a final chapter

offering short narratives that connect the different claims made throughout the book (Ch. 10). Additionally, there are helpful information boxes and review exercises for students throughout, as well as revision tests (Ch. 11) and three appendixes with further exercises.

The textbook successfully challenges some of the more problematic and ageist discourses that circulate in contemporary society, connecting these to the dismantling of the welfare system and the individualization of society brought about by neoliberalism. Furthermore, it includes references to cultural discourses that circulate in the media and society in several chapters, as well as exercises that often employ media analysis to apply and/or further develop the notions covered in the chapters. For example, the chapter on ageism concludes with a review exercise whereby students are asked to assess if media representations of older adults are negative, positive or neutral, and whether they reproduce ageist stereotypes (33). At the end of the chapter on diversity among the older population, students are asked to analyze the representation of older adults in the websites of major charities and evaluate if they effectively represent the diversity that characterizes this population (83). As part of the exercises, students are required to creatively show their findings, in the form of tables, mind maps, social media posts, critical reflections, and newspaper articles. I find the exercises a useful addition to the text, many of which I could imagine using as part of an undergraduate course on cultural gerontology. As such, the textbook functions both as a good introduction to the field of social and critical gerontology (with a specific focus on social policy) and a helpful resource for teaching, especially courses that may wish to bridge social, cultural, and humanistic gerontology.

While the book is distinctly a social sciences textbook, it does include a whole chapter on cultural gerontology, even though – by the authors' own admission – this aspect is somewhat limited. Furthermore, in the chapter, there is a predilection toward ethnographic studies over analyses of media, literature, and art, reflecting the authors' disciplinary “home” in the social sciences. I also detected some oversight in the attribution of several key concepts employed within the text, such as “intersectionality” and “chrononormativity,” which would have benefitted from a more thorough engagement. Lastly, the book mainly focuses on the UK and the USA, and mostly refers to scholarship produced in the global north, making the textbook less helpful to students and scholars emerging from and researching the global south. To counterbalance this focus, the authors could have included suggestions for further reading, such as Hyde and Higg's monograph (2016) *Ageing and Globalisation*, Sarah Lamb's (2017) edited volume *Successful Ageing as a*

Contemporary Obsession: Global Perspectives, and the collection by Abenir et al. (2018) titled *Aging in the Global South: Challenges and Opportunities*.

Ultimately, *Critical Questions for Ageing Societies* is a useful resource for its target audience, but it may appear redundant for more experienced researchers in the field. Nonetheless, it offers a good introduction to some of the key issues related to age and aging in western democracies, providing a good base for research projects in the humanities grounded in an understanding of the social and political contexts in which our objects of study arise.

WORKS CITED

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