

generations will remain a characteristic of human society in the future' (p. 21), and that the family will remain strong and supportive. Similarly Arber, writing about gender issues, says that 'in the future there is likely to be greater recognition and acceptance that close emotional and sexual relationships are important for both older women and men' (p. 57). Some are guardedly optimistic. For instance, Victor, in her chapter on health, states that disability in later life may be decreasing in the developed countries and there may be further overall improvements in both mortality and morbidity. Some take few risks with their predictions, thus Bond and Corner, considering wellbeing, say that 'life over the next 30 to 40 years will be at least as complex as it is now, with a diversity of everyday life experience' (p. 158). On some topics there is more pessimism: social inequality in old age is likely to remain, the prospects for pensions are a cause for concern, tolerance of disability may remain low. This leads to some exhortation rather than pure analysis: Ginn and Price think we must halt the decline in the proportion of pension income provided by the state; Downs says we must create more positive public understanding of dementia. There is also some interesting debate about the nature of the future and how it may be studied, and a recognition – as the title denotes – that there are many possible futures for all of us. Time will tell.

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Jason L. Powell, *Social Theory and Aging*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland, 2005, 157 pp., pbk \$16.95, ISBN 0 7425 1954 6.

As most sociologists of ageing soon discover, there is very little attention to later life in the mainstream of the discipline and particularly in social theory. Sociology courses and textbooks examine the various lines of fracture and stratification thrown up by social class, gender, race and sexual orientation, but are sketchy about the implications of old age or ageing. Accounting for the retired or for older people is often an afterthought or over-generalisation. In part this is a consequence of the era in which the founding figures of sociology, Marx, Durkheim and Weber were writing, but it is also a reflection of the concerns and lives of contemporary practitioners. That this oversight needs correcting is becoming more and more obvious, as the most prosperous societies age and the nature of later life is transformed from a residual category defined by various forms of lack into a positively anticipated post-work life stage. The capacity of social theory to help us understand these changes as well as to benefit from the insights provided needs to be at the core of any sociology of ageing.

Jason Powell's book might have helped us to begin this task, given that it explicitly attempts to combine social theory and ageing. The range of material covered promises much. Not only are conventional social gerontological approaches, such as the political economy of ageing covered, but we are also provided with expositions of the work of Foucault, Giddens and Beck. Unfortunately, the book fails either to make sense of the nature of contemporary social theory or

to help us to extend our understanding of ageing and later life. Treated appropriately, these writers have much relevance for the study of the contemporary circumstances of later life. Equally, later life throws a critical light on many of their ideas and assumptions. Ageing bodies, the changing nature of modernity as well as the development of a 'risk society', are all highlighted in the chapter outlines, but the coverage of these exciting issues rarely lives up to the promise.

It may seem unfair to focus on the negative aspects of this book, but reading it provoked a fair degree of both disappointment and exasperation. One of its overwhelming problems is that it is extremely difficult to read. There is little clear exposition of ideas or indeed of the cited social theory. This is particularly true of the early chapters, in which the text about the nature of biomedicine is both incoherent and repetitive. Terms and ideas such as 'episteme' are used without discussion before the work of Foucault is introduced. The overall effect is not only confusing but has echoes of the infamous 'Sokal hoax'. Two scientists published a deliberately contrived post-modern account of science incorporating randomly chosen terms from the lexicon of cultural studies in the journal *Social Text*. In Powell's case, the self-referentiality is made all the worse by a consistent habit of self-citation on nearly every page of the book. While I am sure that Powell is widely read, I would have liked to see more evidence of this in engagement with other authors' writing rather than by reference to his own articles and book reviews. There are also a number of significant omissions in the account of what constitutes social theory. Not only are the dominant traditions generally ignored, but also contemporary foci such as the sociology of the body are largely excluded. This is all the more problematic given the heavy Foucauldian social-constructionist approach. An enriching engagement with the nature of ageing embodiment is avoided and the reader could be forgiven for assuming that the 'biomedical gaze' is the end of the story. Most bewildering is that Michel Foucault is omitted from the bibliography and his entire output is attributed to the anthropologist Meyer Fortes – something that would have appealed to the author of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

In dealing with post-modernism and the ageing body a number of useful topics are approached, particularly around the ageing body and its relation to popular culture. Again, however, the range of material covered is limited and goes no further than to point out the inherent contradictions of society's view of the declining body and of post-modernism's capacity to focus on marginal discourses that challenge the dominance of the biomedical view of ageing. Body modification is introduced with reference to different ways of ageing but is not developed in a discussion of 'anti-ageing' techniques, and so misses one of the most obvious topics – the practices followed by the increasing numbers of the old as well as the 'not yet old' – that social theory can illuminate. In this, Powell seems to reflect an underlying antipathy to understanding later life in terms of the construction of identity from the resources of consumer society. Like it or not, this is what is happening and the 'social gerontological gaze' is off the mark. Powell is aware of this latter point in his discussion of the role of professional power in the surveillance and governmentality of older people through case-management, but the point is not really developed. This is also true of his

exposition and comments on the work of Giddens and Beck on reflexive modernisation and risk society. Instead of using these theories to bring out the increasing contingency and deinstitutionalisation of later life through a discussion of the changing nature of retirement and pension provision, the reader is presented with an account of the rise of neo-liberalism and the market. Certainly the risk society does connect with aspects of a reconstituted capitalism but it goes much further than the confines of the United Kingdom. The problems of a reflexive modernity also affect Germany, France and Scandinavia and are not only about the conflict between autonomous consumers and the collective structures of the welfare state. Indeed, it could be argued that it is retirement itself that is the embodiment of the contradiction of the risk society. Many notable social democrats point to the generational imbalances that current pension arrangements institutionalise at the expense of younger cohorts. This discussion, sadly, does not take place and leads me to reflect on the conclusion to *Social Theory and Aging*, which claims to have 'critically questioned taken-for-granted assumptions about ageing and old age' (p.135). To my mind this has not really happened in this book, which is to be regretted because the project is exceptionally worthwhile.

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Sarah Harper, *Ageing Societies: Myths, Challenges and Opportunities*, Hodder Arnold, London, 2006, 358 pp., pbk £24.99, ISBN 0 340 51756 5.

This is a timely book, which in many ways provides the answer to those looking for a broad overview of the social, economic and policy consequences of demographic ageing. It draws on a wide range of material and data from official sources and case studies. The book is global in coverage and extensive in the topics and concepts it introduces. As outlined in the Preface, the book is structured in a way that allows the reader to dip in to specific areas and read about different aspects of ageing societies. Chapter 1 provides an overview of ageing societies, in particular from the perspective of demographic change. Chapter 2, on the dynamics of population ageing, and Chapter 3, understanding age and ageing, provide a detailed and accessible explanation of demographic ageing. Chapter 3 is particularly useful in looking at contemporary perspectives on ageing and the lifecourse. Chapters 4 to 7 are the core of the book, as they outline key changes in modern families and their implications for the provision of support and care for older people. The main issues are, in Chapter 4, retirement (historical and contemporary perspectives) and, in Chapter 5, the intergenerational contract and social security. Threats to the intergenerational contract have great potential for undermining the future wellbeing of older persons. This is especially the case in many developing countries where the family has traditionally been the major source of support. In most of these countries, there is in reality little practical prospect of adopting soon any versions of the Anglo-American support models (involving publicly-provided low level pensions supplemented by employer-based defined-contribution pensions plus individual savings). This chapter, therefore,