

Critical Gerontology: Origins, Current Status and Future Developments

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AREAS FOR DISCUSSION

- DEFINITIONS OF CRITICAL GERONTOLOGY
- ORIGINS
- CURRENT THEMES
- RE-THINKING CRITICAL GERONTOLOGY

DEFINITIONS

- Baars (1991) ‘...a collection of questions, problems, and analyses that have been excluded by the established mainstream’
- Phillipson & Walker (1987) ‘...a more valued committed approach to social gerontology – a commitment not just to understand the social construction of ageing but to change it’

ORIGINS

- Economic and social context
- Intellectual/ Academic context
- Biographical context

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT – 1970s/1980s

- Successive economic crises from early-1970s creating mass unemployment;
- fiscal crisis of welfare state
- De-stabilisation of retirement (older people as a ‘reserve army of labour’)
- Linked political crisis with emergence of neo-liberal policies (Thatcherism etc)
- Older people exposed because of reliance on the welfare state (Myles, 1981; 1986)

Intellectual/Academic

- Critical perspectives in social policy (UK)
Townsend (1981), Walker (1980)
Key idea: '**Structured dependency**'
- Critical approaches in sociology (North America)
Estes (1979)
Key idea: '**Social construction of reality**'

Biographical

- Mentors (Maggie Kuhn, Matilda Riley)
- Feminism/Gender inequality
- Political struggle
- Importance of Marxism/Neo-Marxist perspectives/Critical theory

(Ruth Ray, 2008, *Journal of Aging Studies*, Vol. 22)

Political Economy Perspectives

- PE was defined in terms of developing ‘an understanding of the character and significance of variations in the treatment of the aged, and to relate these to polity, economy and society in advanced capitalism’ (Estes, 1986)
- ‘The task of the PE of aging is to locate society’s treatment of aged in the context of the economy...the state, the conditions of the labour market, and the class, sex, race and age divisions in society. **Serious consideration of the relationship of aging to capitalism to ageing is required**’.
(My emphasis)
(Estes, 1999)

Significance of CG (PE)

- Counter-arguments to 'burden' hypothesis: : 'crisis construction of ageing'
- 'Social construction of retirement'
- 'Interlocking' nature of class, race, gender and age
- Analysis of the state: allocating resources, mediating between different social classes, ameliorating conditions that threaten the social order
- Challenge to older people's experience of being passive consumers of health and welfare services

(Minkler & Estes, 1999; Phillipson, 1998)

CG from the Humanities

- Critique of ‘instrumental gerontology’ (Moody, 1988) – SG dominated by a form of rationality that seeks to objectify what is an essentially human and subjective experience’
- Cole (1992) ‘We must acknowledge that our great progress in the material and physical conditions of life has been achieved at a high spiritual and ethical price. Social security has not enhanced ontological security or dignity in old age. The elderly continue to occupy an inferior status in the moral community marginalised by an economy and culture committed to the scientific management of growth without limit’

Current themes

- Inequality and social exclusion (Formosa & Higgs, 2013; Keating and Scharf, 2007)
- Frailty and agency (Grenier, 2012)
- Political economy of care
- Gender inequalities/ gender and work (Calasanti, 2010)
- Ageing in the global south (Hoffman & Pype, forthcoming)
- Ageing in cities (Buffel et al., 2013)
- Cultural gerontology and links with CG (Twigg & Martin, 2014; 2015)

BUT IS THERE A POST-2008 GERONTOLOGY?

Critical gerontology has struggled to develop a response to the financial crisis and its impact on older people:

- Weaknesses in theory
- Uncertainty about direction given decline of 'social' or 'welfare' state and no obvious replacement
- Complexity of stratification among older people

A new analysis of neo-liberalism is required:

- Konings (2010: 6) argues that: 'It is only on an *ideological* level neoliberalism has been about market disembedding or the subordination of politics to the market. Neoliberal *practices* have never been about institutional retreat or diminishing political capacities but, instead, about the construction of new institutional mechanisms of control'.
- This argument provides a way of developing a new set of approaches for critical gerontology, where the emphasis is on exploring the multiple ways in which neo-liberalism – at local, national and global levels – invents new cultural, economic and social connections in the vacuum created by the retreat of the welfare state.
- Ageing post-2008 is being reconstructed through an austerity politics but through neo-liberal practices

RE-THINKING CRITICAL GERONTOLOGY

- **Re-thinking the State**
- **Re-thinking Solidarity**
- **Re-thinking Social class**

RE-THINKING THE STATE

‘We have freed ourselves of the mid-20th century assumption – never universal but certainly widespread – that the state is likely to be the *best* solution to any given problem. We now need to liberate ourselves from the opposite notion: that the state is by definition and always the *worst* available option...’

Judt, (2010) *Ill-fares the land: a treatise on our present discontents*

SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND AGEING SOCIETIES

New task of understanding ageing in context of ‘hollowing out of institutions of solidarity’ (Rosanvallon, 2013)

- **Mutual solidarities e.g. building sustainable communities using the skills of different age-groups in areas affected by de-industrialisation (Steinig & Butts, 2010)**
- **Friendship- and neighbouring based solidarities e.g. acknowledging the loosening of kin and increased importance of non-kin ties (Pahl, 2000)**
- **Alternative forms of production (Castells et al., 2013)**
- **Global solidarities e.g. development of links with movements campaigning on abuses of globalisation (Graeber, 2013).**

SOLIDARITY: GLOBAL CAPITALISM AND A NEW ECONOMIC CULTURE?

Castells et al. (2013) argue that the crisis in global capitalism is producing a new economic culture, one which expands 'decommodified' modes of production. e.g. increases in co-operative groups, voluntary groups and time banks

But he also cites survey evidence that older age groups less involved with local action; also evidence from global protest movements (Mason, 2012; Graeber, 2013)

- **Are older people 'doubly-disadvantaged' – less social protection; less engaged with community protest?**

Changing constructions of old age: the re-emergence of social class?

Low social inequality > **High social inequality**

Strong generations > **Weak generations**

Social/economic reciprocity

Economic fragmentation

Weak social class > **Strong social class**

Social state, Public services

DB – DC, Extending working

Low inheritance, Comp. Ret

Privatization, High inheritance

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Strong citizenship > **Weak citizenship**

Marshall's 'social rights'

Standing's 'Precariat'

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High economic growth

Low economic growth

CONCLUSION

- **IS A DIFFERENT TYPE OF AGEING EMERGING WITH A COMBINATION OF ANTI-AUSTERITY POLICIES AND LOW GROWTH ECONOMIES?**
- **FOR SOCIOLOGY OF AGEING – WHAT PATTERNS OF RESPONSE AND RESISTENCE MIGHT EMERGE AMONG MARGINALISED OLDER PEOPLE IN THE GLOBAL NORTH AND SOUTH?**
- **CONVERSELY, WHAT NEW PATTERNS OF PRIVILEGE MIGHT DEVELOP AMONG AN AGEING ELITE?**
- **IN THE CONTEXT OF A POLITICAL ECONOMY DRIVING FRAGMENTATION RATHER THAN INTEGRATION WHAT IS MEANINGFUL ABOUT ‘AGE’ AS A SOCIOLOGICAL CATEGORY?**
- **CAN WORK ON THESE QUESTIONS BE PART OF A DISTINCTIVE RESEARCH PROGRAMME FOR A NEW POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF ‘AGE’ AND ‘GENERATIONS’?**

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