

# Review Articles

## THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF OLD AGE

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Chris Phillipson, *Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age*, Macmillan, London, 1982, 188 pp., £12.50, ISBN 0 333 28642 1.

The contradictions that old age entails for a large proportion of elderly people are posed more sharply today than at any other period in Britain's modern history. In ever-increasing numbers older workers are being encouraged or forced out of the labour-market into unemployment, or what is euphemistically called 'early retirement'. Along with this trend the definition of old age itself is being altered and there is mounting pressure from all parts of the political spectrum to formally lower the retirement age for men.<sup>1</sup> As a result of the economic changes and policies which underpin this trend, more and more older workers are expected to survive, if they are lucky, for periods nearly equal in length of that of their working lives, in a situation of economic dependency. Thus the popular slogans which accompany retirement and early retirement policies, offering enhanced opportunities for leisure activities, are for many a cruel deception reflecting, at best, a brief prelude to long-term poverty and deprivation.

Ageism is becoming more prevalent in major social and economic institutions, partly because of the extension downward of the age-barrier for retirement. At the same time the economic doctrine of monetarism has been used popularly to re-translate conventional wisdom about many aspects of social policy.<sup>2</sup> The post-war consensus over the funding of old age pensions – as a sort of social contract between the generations – is beginning to be questioned, most alarmingly from inside the Treasury. As a direct result of government policies the welfare state, which provides all elderly people with a social wage in one form or another, has been cut back. For example, the relative level of the state retirement pension has been reduced. Health and personal social services have also been cut and the number of authorities charging for services has increased, as has the level of charges. In the 56 local authorities surveyed by the Association of Directors of Social Services in 1980, one-half had cut expenditure on the home help service in

1979/80 and well over a third were doing so in 1980/81. Thirty-five authorities reported increases in their home help charges in 1979/80 – ten of them were making charges for the first time.<sup>3</sup>

It is in recognition of developments such as these that Chris Phillipson states 'This book has been written in a period of crisis for elderly people' (p. 1). In response he sets out to develop a critical account of the position of elderly people in a capitalist society. (These days 'critical' invariably means Marxist and this book is no exception.) The result is an illuminating analysis of the social status of elderly people in British society and those factors which have contributed to their increasing marginalisation. Each chapter builds into a scathing attack on the social production of and response to old age and the limitations of social policy under capitalism. The analysis is underpinned by a strong sense of outrage at the treatment of older people by capitalist institutions, including the state, and this gives the book a welcome sharpness and sensitivity to the needs of the elderly. It is clearly set out and closely argued, and written in a style which should make it accessible to more than a purely academic readership. Certainly the book deserves to be read widely, by all those interested in understanding the social meaning of old age, assessing the impact of social policies on elderly people and constructing alternatives to current policy and practice.

The book analyses the social construction of old age by the capitalist state. It assembles a large amount of information on the status and conditions of elderly people. But it does not stop at theoretical analysis and empirical description, it includes a commentary on the political dimension and in fact, devotes a chapter and a large part of the conclusion to political struggles and organisation. This provides lessons and imaginative guidelines for future action by and on behalf of elderly people. Furthermore the book includes, periodically, practical suggestions for policy and practice, for example on social work practice (p. 113).

Of particular importance in the social construction or production of old age is the process of retirement, and a substantial part of the book is devoted, rightly, to the subject. This brings some of Phillipson's earlier work deservedly to the reach of a wide audience. In the two subsequent chapters the differential experience of men and women in retirement is examined. This is another welcome departure because the discussion of retirement has been conducted almost entirely in relation to elderly men. This entails the long-overdue extension of the analysis of production and retirement to encompass domestic labour, and some very sharp comments about the failure of the women's movement to address the issue of women in later life. This is followed by consideration of the

impact of state legislation and social work practice on the elderly. The latter analysis of narrow and ageist social work perspectives on the elderly should be required reading for all social workers and social work students. The final two chapters cover the politics of ageing, drawing on evidence from the U.S.A., and alternative socialist construction of old age, which includes some discussion of ageing in China and the Soviet Union.

### **Towards a structural theory of ageing**

For many years social gerontology and social policy towards the elderly have been dominated by narrow functionalist theories of ageing. In a variety of forms these theories have explained the process of ageing and the role of the elderly in terms of individual or group adjustment.<sup>4</sup> Elderly people are treated as a distinct homogeneous group in various stages of adjustment to the ageing process. Such theories are based on the implicit assumption that the status of older people can be explained in isolation from the rest of the social and economic structure in any society. It is as if the influence of the class structure ends at retirement age and all those beyond it face common problems. Most important of all, the stereotype of the elderly as a homogeneous group with special needs has exerted a considerable influence on both public attitudes and social policies towards this group.

Until recently politicians, civil servants and social policy analysts have reflected, by and large, the consensus framework of social science theories of ageing. But as the discussion of state legislation and the elderly in this book demonstrates, far from being a matter of consensus, social policy towards the elderly is a contentious terrain.

Postwar social policy has been distinguished by conflict over the elderly's share of attention and resources. Dissension has appeared at a political level... at a medical level... and at the level of local government social services (p.80).

This suggests that there are even more difficult times ahead for marginalised and economically dependent elderly people in the battle for resources. It also, incidentally, points to the need for a more active role for social gerontologists than has been achieved up to now, in furthering the interests of elderly people, contributing to their political consciousness and providing an improved basis for transformative social policies.

In recent years the dominant functionalist paradigm in social gerontology has been called into question increasingly. The main reason

is the failure of existing theories to explain some of the key experiences associated with old age, such as the marginalisation of elderly people and the differential impact of retirement. One aspect of this is the relative neglect of women in studies of the retirement process. This has meant, in turn, that social gerontology has not been able to make an adequate policy response to recent changes in the role and status of elderly people. Thus, as Carol Estes and her colleagues pointed out recently in relation to the U.S., social gerontologists themselves have 'effectively legitimised incrementalist and individualistic approaches to public policy for the elderly'.<sup>5</sup> As a result a growing number of social gerontologists have been turning their attention away from subcultural and individualistic theories of ageing towards approaches which locate ageing and elderly people within the prevailing social and economic structure of society.<sup>6</sup> This book is an important contribution to that growing body of structural conceptions of ageing.

One important element of this new paradigm is the conceptualisation of old age and the reduced social status and dependency associated with it – be it economic, political and to a significant extent physical or mental dependency – as a social construct. So, it is argued that old age and the characteristics associated with it are produced by the dominant institutions in any social system. (Interestingly this approach appears to be being pursued more vigorously in the U.S. than in this country.) For Chris Phillipson the crucial institution in this process of social construction is retirement. This chapter on the emergence of retirement, although familiar to those who know his earlier work on the subject, is outstanding and the cornerstone of the whole book. In it he traces the growth of age-barrier retirement and the fluctuating use of older workers as a reserve army of labour, to be sucked into the labour-market when needed and quickly dispensed with when no longer required. One result of this is that, not surprisingly, older workers 'are often confused and uncertain in their attitudes towards retirement' (p.17). The contrast of different political and social attitudes to retirement at different stages of twentieth-century British history provides a telling commentary on current policies.

Chris Phillipson's analysis of the emergence of retirement is situated subsequently within the context of the capitalist mode of production. The process of production is central to an understanding of the social construction of old age because it has a major, if not consistently dominant, influence on all other institutions as well as key values in society. In turn, retirement effectively marks out one of the main barriers between 'productive' and 'unproductive' sectors of the economy. In a society based on the work, or rather paid employment, ethic

this inevitably entails reduced social status and economic dependency. This is especially the case in capitalist societies where a strong work ethic is coupled with values such as individualism, inequality and self-help. Social policies, as well as economic policies, reflect these values and as a consequence, even those elderly people who have worked in the productive sector for a full term of 30 or more years are often reduced to living on poverty-level incomes. Thus, as Leonard points out in his introduction to this book, 'The fact that in capitalist society people are valued primarily in economic terms is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than by an examination of social policy towards the elderly' (p.xi).

Employment is the chief source of economic status and rewards and the rise of superannuation is a fundamental factor in the production of economic dependency and marginalisation amongst a substantial proportion of elderly people. Equally, in distinguishing the 'productive' and 'unproductive', the independent from the dependent and imposing an arbitrary cut-off point on older workers by institutional rules or customary practice, the process of retirement is the major element in the social definition of old age.

### **The limitations of a Marxist framework**

So far so good. Chris Phillipson's account provides us with a clear understanding of the crucial role of retirement in the social construction of old age. The difficulty arises for me at the next stage, in attempting to explain the rise of retirement solely in relation to the requirements of the dominant mode of production. It is here that I begin to have some reservations about a thorough-going Marxist analysis, because the deep insights it provides into the nature of the experience of ageing under capitalism give way to some oversimplification and a form of functionalism similar to that which already dominates a great deal of thinking in social gerontology.

It is a familiar defect of Marxist analyses that a rather simple dichotomy is built up between capitalism and socialism, and this serves to obscure important variations in experience *both* within and between capitalist societies. The danger is recognised by Chris Phillipson:

It might be objected here that such a perspective is extreme and that it does little justice to the major attempts of reform in the postwar years. However, these attempts have left the elderly vulnerable to unemployment and redundancy and with living standards some twenty years behind the rest of the population (p.17).

Moreover, his attempts to overcome it are more sustained and successful than many other Marxist accounts in social policy. Of particular importance here is the examination of the differential experience of men and women in retirement. Despite this the potential for variation *within* capitalist relations is under-emphasised.

Undoubtedly, as Chris Phillipson argues, capitalism has a distinct set of economic and social priorities (p.3). But this does not mean that there is not potential for significant variation within them. Thus while Patrick Jenkin (former Secretary of State for Social Services) put defence spending above the needs of the elderly and other disadvantaged groups, a different order of priorities is revealed by an examination of the record of the previous, Labour, government. True there were cuts in social services, but there were even larger cuts in defence. Furthermore, as Chris Phillipson recognises (p.95), there have been and continue to be significant differences between the political parties in their commitment to maintain the purchasing power of state retirement pensions. But my aim is not to defend the (poor) record of the last Labour government, only to indicate that some variation in social and economic priorities is possible under capitalism.

This point becomes clearer if we turn our attention to variations *between* capitalist societies. There are, for example, considerable differences between the U.S. and Great Britain in the provision of social services. There are significant variations between Britain, Denmark and the U.S. in the extent of labour-force participation of older workers.<sup>7</sup> There are marked differences in the approach to retirement in Sweden compared with this country. In recent years a number of flexible retirement options have been introduced. For example, a partial pension scheme was introduced in 1976 for people between the ages of 60 and 64 who are employed and reduce their working hours by an average of at least 5 hours per week who continue to work an average 17 hours per week. Eligibility for disability pensions is also less stringent for older workers than younger workers.<sup>8</sup>

Having established the potential for significant variation in the social policy response to ageing *between* different capitalist societies, it is important not to over-emphasise it. This can only occur within fairly clearly defined limits, in ways that do not endanger the dominant form and values of production and distribution. The needs of elderly people cannot be met fully and inequalities between elderly people and the rest of society cannot be overcome within the framework of a predominantly capitalist society. In fact this is one specific example of the general dilemma facing radical social policy under capitalism: the need to interfere in the market and the impossibility of doing so.<sup>9</sup> This book is

concerned primarily with the structural limits to change and, as a result, glosses over somewhat the existing variations in policy and practice and therefore underestimates the potential for change.

Related to this, the second minor limitation of the book is the tendency to overlook major differences in social status *between* elderly people. Of course retirement has the general effect of depressing income levels, and poverty, low incomes and economic dependency are characteristic of the majority of the elderly population. And this book provides us with a detailed account of the social factors underlying this dependent status. But there are large numbers of elderly people who remain relatively prosperous in old age. There are substantial inequalities between different groups of elderly people. There are differences in health status, as Chris Phillipson points out (p. 13), but there are also differences in the access of different groups to various resources, such as occupational pensions and savings. These two nations in old age are based on disparities in power and status *prior to* retirement. In other words, retirement has a differential impact on older workers.

A political economy of ageing must recognise and explain these differences in power and status among the elderly. The limitation of Marxist political economy is that it tends to concentrate overly on institutional power. Again, Chris Phillipson is more aware than most of this danger. Even so, largely because of the Marxist framework, his attention is focused on the macro or institutional level. For example, he rightly asserts that the development of occupational pension schemes has 'generated a striking disparity' in old age. What does this consist of? 'On the one hand, there is the poverty and hardship experienced by millions of pensioners; on the other hand, there is the increasing power of the pension funds' (p. 13). This is an important observation, but there is also a considerable disparity in power between some of the recipients of occupational pensions and the vast majority of elderly people with little or no stake in the private pension sector. If we are to formulate a structural theory of ageing which adequately explains both the social production of old age and the unequal experience of ageing between social classes as well as the sexes, then attention must turn to inequalities in status and power over the working life.

A third limitation of Marxist analyses, which also diminishes to some extent the explanatory force of this book, is the tendency to reduce causal explanations to a form of functionalism. Thus retirement is seen as a social institution functional to the needs of capitalism (p. 158). While this is undoubtedly the case, it is only part of the story. Also to be taken into account are the interests of workers in pursuit, for whatever reason, of retirement. Retirement, then, must be seen in part at least as a

response to the expressed needs of workers. So, it is not only those willing to act as cheap labour or in possession of a required skill who are able to remain in work, but also those with sufficient power to secure an extension of normal working life. The motives of capital and labour are obviously different, but both must be taken into account in the construction of theory and policy. The current consensus between political spokesmen as diverse as Norman Tebbit and Arthur Scargill over early retirement demonstrates the apparently contradictory elements in the growth of retirement. This helps to explain the confused responses of elderly people to retirement which Chris Phillipson pinpoints.

Finally, one of the chief strengths of Marxist theory is also a source of weakness in the construction of social policy. Marxism correctly points to the fundamental importance of the dominant mode of production in determining the particular character of inequality in capitalist societies. This focuses attention on the process and relations of production as the main determinant of differences in economic and social status. In this context changes in the structure and process of production are a major contributory factor in the emergence of retirement and the social creation of dependency in old age. But if the analysis of the structural determinants of dependency stopped there it would overlook the role of other elements in the social structure.

Of especial importance are state social policies and professional power which may operate to create and sustain dependency and a particular construction of old age.<sup>10</sup> Also, as Carol Estes and her colleagues have indicated, social scientists themselves contribute to the social construction of what growing old entails.<sup>11</sup> In addition there is the role of primary relationships, especially those of the immediate family, in the construction or deconstruction of age and dependency. The role of the family is, of course, central to an understanding of the experience of ageing. It is especially important in the discussion of the case of physically or mentally disabled elderly by both the formal and informal sector. One example of this is the fact that between twice and three times as many bedfast and severely disabled elderly people are living in their own homes as in all institutions put together.<sup>12</sup>

Chris Phillipson is clearly aware of the danger of dwelling solely on the relations of production in explaining the social construction of age under capitalism, and he includes detailed analyses of the influence of state legislation, social work and medicine on the elderly.

Some of the limitations of a Marxist framework are to be found in this volume. But they are balanced, to a considerable extent, by the light it sheds on the structure of economic and social relations which produce



a particular construction of old age and the fact that Chris Phillipson has made sustained efforts to minimise these limitations. The construction of better explanatory theories of ageing requires that we recognise the weaknesses of a Marxist model as the sole one within which to build theory and policy, as well as those of the paradigms which have dominated social gerontology for so long. In this book Chris Phillipson has consolidated a great deal of material on the social construction of old age under capitalism, and in doing so has performed a considerable service for social gerontology in clearing a great deal of the theoretical and empirical debris blocking the path to the formation of a structural theory of ageing.

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## NOTES

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- 2 P. Golding, Rethinking common sense about social policy. In D. Bull and P. Wilding (eds), *Thatcherism and the Poor*, CPAG, London, 1983, pp. 7–12.
- 3 Quoted in T. Snow, *Services for Old Age: A Growing Crisis in London*, Survey, Age Concern, 1981.
- 4 See for example E. Cumming and W. Henry, *Growing Old*, Basic Books, New York, 1961. A. M. Rose, The subculture of the ageing: a framework in social gerontology. In A. M. Rose and W. A. Peterson (eds), *Older People and Their Social World*, F. A. Davis, Philadelphia, 1965, pp. 3–16.
- 5 C. L. Estes, J. H. Swan and L. E. Gerard, Dominant and competing paradigms in gerontology: towards a political economy of ageing. *Ageing and Society*, 2, 2 (1982), p. 152.
- 6 See for example A-M. Guillemard, *Le Vieillesse et l'Etat*, PUF, Paris, 1980; A. Walker, The social creation of poverty and dependency in old age, *Journal of Social Policy*, 9, 1 (1980), 49–75; *idem*, Towards a political economy of old age, *Ageing and Society*, 1, 1 (1981), 73–94; P. Townsend, The structured dependency of the elderly: a creation of social policy in the twentieth century, *Ageing and Society*, 1, 1 (1981), 5–28; C. L. Estes *et al.*, *op. cit.*
- 7 E. Shanas *et al.* *Old People in Three Industrial Societies*, Routledge, London, 1968.
- 8 Social Services Committee, *op. cit.* pp. 216–221.
- 9 Z. Ferge, *A Society in the Making*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1979, p. 53.
- 10 P. Townsend, *op. cit.* A. Walker, Dependency and old age, *Social Policy and Administration*, 16, 2 (1982), 115–135.
- 11 *Op. cit.* p. 152.
- 12 P. Townsend, Elderly people with disabilities. In A. Walker and P. Townsend (eds), *Disability in Britain*, Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1981, p. 96.