

Social Theory and Aging, by Jason L. Powell. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD, 2005, 160 pp., $60.00 (cloth), $19.95 (paper).

Our intellectual tradition in social gerontology is rooted in the disciplines from which we emerge: economics, sociology, philosophy, psychology, political science, public policy, and anthropology to name just a few. These intellectual traditions have been used to establish a scholarly foundation in gerontology that has largely been built over the past half-century following World War II. Not unlike other rather recent emerging fields of study, gerontology has amassed considerable intellectual capital with its discourse building on the successive works of others. This pyramidal process of scholarly contributions building upon one another, layer after layer, has recently surfaced with works that challenge our thinking and provide fresh insights and new perspectives.

We have entered a time period when theoretical works are emerging, being debated, and being refined. It has been nearly twenty years since James Birren and Vern Bengtson first so succinctly stated in Emergent Theories of Aging (1988) that gerontology is a field that has become “rich in data but poor in theory” (p. ix). During the ensuing years, considerable self-criticism and introspection has taken place in gerontology regarding the development of theory. The result has been a recent flurry of intellectual contributions that have extended the discourse about aging and the aging society. The gerontological scholar of today has a body of serious scholarly work to draw upon in order to embed his or her research in a theoretical context. These theoreticians, for the most part, are writing for other gerontological thinkers. It has become a collection of works that can be considered gerontology’s own. Many of the most prolific writers have emerged from a European tradition providing intellectual leadership which has helped fuel the ensuing articles and books.

Some of the major contributors to this cornucopia of theoretical riches have included: Jan Baars, Simon Biggs, Vern Bengtson, Tom Cole, Charles Longino, Jr., Dale Dannefer, Carroll Estes, Chris Gilleard, Jon Hendricks, Paul Higgs, Martha Holstein, Stephen Katz, Meredith Minkler, H.R. (Rick) Moody, John Myles, Chris Phillipson, Larry Polikva, Jason Powell, Matilda and John Riley, and Alan Walker to name a few. The list is not intended to be exhaustive, as there are many others, but it is designed to reflect some of the most persistent and creative writers on the subject. While there has been, and continues to be, considerable effort at developing gerontological conceptualizations and templates for analyzing the aging society, others whose primary home remains exclusively within their individual disciplinary affiliation unfortunately persist in postulating “monodisciplinary” theoretical constructs. These are quickly and appropriately criticized as a microfication of gerontology. This sort of pseudo-gerontology emerges when applying micro-theories from the core disciplines directly to gerontology. Often these theories lack the complexity that represents an aging individual within the larger political, social, and economic environment. In order to move beyond the micro-theories that have emerged from single disciplines, it is important for the investigator to become immersed in the growing interdisciplinary content in gerontology and the body of literature that pushes this envelope and eclipsed the oversimplified micro-theories.

Several new interdisciplinary gerontological volumes have appeared that merit close attention, and in this essay will review three of them. The first is Social Theory and Aging (2006), by Jason L. Powell, a lecturer in sociology at the University of Liverpool. Another new volume is Aging, Globalization and Inequality: The New Critical Gerontology, edited by Jan Baars, Dale Dannefer, Chris Phillipson, and Alan Walker. Baars has two appointments; one is as Professor of Interpretive Gerontology at the University for Human-istics in the Netherlands, and the other as Professor of Philosophy of the Social Sciences and the Humanities at Tilburg University also in the Netherlands. Dannefer is Professor of Sociology at Case Western Reserve University; Phillipson is a Professor of Applied Social Studies and Social Gerontology at the University of Keele; and Walker is Professor of Social Policy at the University of Sheffield. The third book, Contexts of Ageing: Class, Cohort and Community, is by Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs. Gilleard is Director of Psychology, South West London and St. George’s Mental Health Trust. Higgs is Rector in Medical
Social Theory and Aging

Powell’s book, *Social Theory and Aging*, reviews the development of social theory and its application to gerontology, reminding us throughout the work of the philosophic thinkers that have come before. In his book, Powell reviews the differing perspectives of the early theoretical concepts and provides a thoughtful critique of each approach. A summary of the functionalist theorists that dominated early thinking about the aging society is advanced—these include the disengagement and engagement theories. The remaining influence of biomedical perspectives on aging is also explored and critiqued. Pointing to the work of modernists, which have included writers that explore critical gerontology, the political economy of aging, functionalism, and feminist gerontology, Powell elaborates on the contributions to broad thinking about large-scale influences and gives a detailed discussion of the limitations of this macro-perspective on aging. These include scholars such as Carroll Estes, Alan Walker, Chris Phillipson, H.R. Moody, and Simon Biggs.

Powell’s critique of the conceptualization of aging sets the stage for his material about postmodern perspectives on aging. It is Chapter 4, “Postmodernism, Culture, and the Aging Body,” that may be the book’s most important to the educated gerontological reader. In this chapter, Powell attempts to weave a sociological discussion of the aging body which has been less evident in sociological discourse and has been primarily approached from a medical and biological perspective. He states, “We can question how the aging body acquires meaning, and also how the meaningful body itself, in its turn, influences and limits signifying processes and social efforts as related to society and culture” (p.66). Although the reader would like to learn more about Powell’s development of postmodern theoretical perspectives on the body and society, he devotes much of his attention to where the philosophical concepts emerged that helped fuel a postmodern movement. Powell notes that it is the work of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, and Jean-Francois Lyotard that have provided the framework of postmodern thinking to social gerontology. According to Powell, these philosophers, among others, view truth as contextual and missing objectivity; have abandoned formal structural descriptions of society and replaced them with concepts that are fluid, flexible, and malleable; and indicate that power in postmodern society is decentralized in the hands of consumers that can be influenced by marketing. More on Powell’s thinking about the body from a social science perspective, like that found in chapters 7, 8, and 9 of Gilleard and Higgs first book, *Cultures of Aging* (2000), would have further strengthened this important chapter. Powell, in his next chapter, goes on to discuss how postmodernist Michel Foucault might explore aging.

The book’s intended audience is a bit hard to decipher. It could be used as a text on gerontological social theory for a graduate course—but then it is probably better for students at the graduate level to read the original works rather than Powell’s summary and critique of the literature. The book would be difficult for undergraduates to read and understand, at least for those in the United States. As a book for other scholars, the first three chapters summarize literature which many social gerontologists will have read, the fourth chapter is addressed to scholars, and the next two are a more personal exploration and tribute to an important influence in Powell’s own thinking—Michel Foucault. The last chapter is a summary conclusion.

Powell’s work is a serious piece of scholarship that reflects a thoughtful and reflective mind, even though its intended audience remains unclear. The chapters in the book often cite his 25 other authored or coauthored works and stay very close to the literature as we know it. It is interesting to note that his five-page-long final chapter twice refers to “we” regarding authorship, but the book is solo authored by Powell. Perhaps, the chapters are a collection of works over time that were eventually integrated into one book. This is merely speculation and it is hard to tell how the book was prepared, and for whom.

Aging, Globalization and Inequality: The New Critical Gerontology

*Aging, Globalization and Inequality: The New Critical Gerontology* is a compendium with contributions by many of the critical gerontologists Powell has critiqued in his book *Social Theory and Aging*. It is a collection of 15 different chapters clustered into three sections. The first section, following an introduction, has a chapter by each of the editors (and also one by Carroll Estes) which explores some of the thinking resident in the critical gerontology movement.

The second section of the book examines aging and health as cultural dimensions. In Chapter 7, Stephen Katz expands upon Powell’s interest of the sociology of the aging body cited earlier. An interesting chapter by Neil King and Toni Calasanti can be found just after Katz’s essay that reminds us that aging is taking place in a global context and that much of the way we think about aging is from a developed nation perspective, which they call the “Global North” (p. 139). According to King and Calasanti, this Global North perspective often ignores the circumstances in which most of the world’s population finds itself—if they are fortunate enough to enter late life. They state, “we citizens of absurdly wealthy nations have been told by people around the world that our well-intentioned spread of modernity’s blessings—mass education; individual freedom, democratic government; and the partial dismantling of slavery, patriarchy, and caste—may have angered some of our neighbors, who value those ideals less than those of traditional rank, orthodox authority, and communal sacrifice” (p.153). With so many of the contributions coming from scholars immersed in the cultural influences of the Global North, it is no surprise

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that much of the theoretical literature may have little application beyond the borders of the developed world and, perhaps, overlooks the experiences pertinent to the aged in the less developed nations. A universal theory in social gerontology will need to be broad enough to provide a template to understand the aging experience in any community and in any nation state. While this is the intellectual challenge, it has yet to be achieved.

The last section of the book’s theme is around age and inequality. This section houses the widest range of topics with a bit of a potpourri of subjects on retirement, health disparities, income inequality, cumulative disadvantage over the life course, and globalization of aging. It is not clear to the reader why certain chapters were placed in this section rather than elsewhere in the book where they might also fit as well. The tightness and connectedness found in the first six chapters in the first section is less evident in the next two, with the range being widest in the final section. This is not a major criticism of the book, just an observation and may be a function of the range of the material that came in to the editors rather than what they may have originally intended at the outset of the creation of the volume.

This is a thoughtful volume, which pushes the envelope of our thinking about an aging society in a changing world context. The level of discourse evidenced in this volume and others among critical gerontologists, has reached a point where much of the earlier criticism of social gerontology—that it is lacking theory—should now be put to rest. The writings coming forward around theory are deep, thoughtful, and provocative. The critical gerontologists are quickly responding to one another in a rich dialogue that has advanced our thinking about aging individuals in contemporary society. While this flood of theoretical work has included some American scholars, as mentioned earlier, the authors for the most part have been Europeans who have had a strong tradition of philosophical and theoretical exchange. One chapter, in particular, by Alan Walker in Aging, *Globalization and Inequality* stands out as a contribution to the literature that merits further elaboration in this review.

Walker’s chapter, “Reexamining the Political Economy of Aging: Understanding the Structure/Agency Tension,” is a must read. It is here where Walker both critiques the postmodernist perspective, yet also begins to integrate the divide that Powell speaks to among those of the political economy persuasion and those of the postmodern perspective. A gulf exists that is quite wide in that the postmodernists reject the Marxist ideology that serves as an important theoretical underpinning of the political economists’ framework. Walker writes in his chapter, “The social construction of old age showed that in important respects the risks associated with aging differ between social groups—class/occupation, gender, race, and so on—and that these differences are determined to a large extent prior to old age, and that this core message is as true today as it was nearly three decades ago” (p.69). Postmodernists point out that the industrial age has passed, and a new and different set of lenses are needed to understand the aged in the current time period, replacing those lenses historically worn by the political economists. The political economists argue the postmodernists “commit the very sin that they criticize the political economists for: one-sidedness” (p.70). Alternatively, Postmodernists see themselves as attempting to describe the world they now observe—a world that is quite different than found in the industrial economies of the 1950s.

Walker, however, poses the salient issue: whether or not the political economy approach—born under modernism—still has relevance for the way we interpret aging in the late-modern, postindustrial period characterized by globalization and new forms of risk” (p.59). He responds by proposing some adjustments and a new conceptual framework that examines issues of social equality directed to the political economy proponents. Although he is clearly of the political economy perspective, Walker writes, “The relevance of this discussion of the theoretical basis of the social is that it provides a methodology for understanding the constant tension between structure and agency in everyday life, including over the life course, and thereby, a way to reconcile the critiques that political economy overemphasizes structure (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000) and that life course and some cultural perspectives overemphasize agency (Dannefer & Uhlenberg, 1999)” (p.76). The next step will be how the postmodernist theorists will respond to Walker—and they will.

This is the kind of important, and at times heated argument, that was missing in the earlier “data-rich theory-poor” years and is critical to the development of theories within social gerontology. Theory building and vigorous intellectual exchange is additive, even when in disagreement, pushing ideas toward a better articulation of positions and, as a consequence, advancing our use of language, thinking, and eventually social gerontology theory. Let this review now shift from the political economy perspective to that of a postmodern work.

**Contexts of Ageing: Class, Cohort and Community**

*Contexts of Aging: Class, Cohort and Community* is the second of two books by Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs. Both authors are from the United Kingdom. It is the opinion of this reviewer that Gilleard and Higgs rank among most original and independent thinkers on aging and the aging society writing today. I have had the good fortune to review their first book, *Cultures of Ageing* in *The Gerontologist* (Bass, 2002) and their second book is as groundbreaking as the first. Although their work has great relevance to Powell’s writing it is only touched on in Powell’s book. Nevertheless, it is discussed quite a bit, and quite critically, by different authors in *Aging, Globalization and Inequality*. What Gilleard and Higgs have demonstrated in their two books is what postmodern theory can provide to social gerontology. They begin where Powell ends, and take the reader to a whole new way of thinking about aging.

Essentially what Gilleard and Higgs argue is that the industrial age brought about the modern era in
developed nations that gave us the social welfare state, the kinds of family relationships, and the role of employer and employee that characterized the United States and European nations up until, perhaps, the 1960s. At that time, through cultural and economic changes, these developed nations entered a postmodern world with dramatic alterations in relationships that had been fairly stable for the 50 previous years or more. Just as the modern era brought changes in the way we defined and planned for the aging society, so too does the postmodern society bring with it radical changes in way we age, think about aging, and the role of older people in society.

As we change the underlying relationships in a postindustrial society, Gilleard and Higgs point out, so too should we alter the way we conceptualize aging and the aging society. If much of the theoretical streams in social gerontology draw from the contributions of Marx and others, Gilleard and Higgs have thrown out these foundational building blocks that have underlain the social gerontology literature for the past 30–40 years and started fresh.

What they have provided to gerontology is equivalent to what Frank Gehry has brought to architecture. Rather than seeing design through straight lines and geometric shapes evolving from one era to the next, Gehry reflected a new paradigm of asymmetric design, curves, shapes, twists, utilizing new materials generating images that had not been previously considered in design or construction. This is not to criticize the importance of conventional architecture, nor to say that there is no longer a role for previous theoretical paradigms in gerontology, but to point out that Gilleard and Higgs have boldly gone out in a new direction and have identified elements that reflect a way to organize and explain a postmodern world.

In their first book, *Cultures of Ageing*, they looked at self, citizen, and body as organizing elements to describe a consumer driven society where older people are engaged participants. Whether it is in fashion, recreation, entertainment, health care, or plastic surgery, aging in the developed world does not operate under the same rules as it did just after the second World War.

Now, in *Contexts of Ageing*, Gilleard and Higgs have attempted to trace the issues of class, cohort, and community as reference points in describing the aging society. At times, perhaps, they try to cover too much material in the pages of the book by summarizing how things have changed in each of the three dimensions—class, cohort, and community—over the last 100 years in both the United States and Europe. While this could be fodder for several books, it is presented in 166 pages, over 8 chapters. What they provide, however, is the pathway on which others may build. For some scholars, the level of detail, in which several rather complex historical events are summarized, may simply be too brief and underdeveloped. But, the shortcomings are hardly fatal and are not sufficiently serious to detour the gerontological scholar who may be less interested in a detailed historical analysis of 1960s America and more interested in the implications for aging and the aged. And, for some readers, the reach of the book and the span it covers in a relatively few pages may be a welcomed blessing.

Chapter 8, “Fog-lamps and Leitmotifs,” flows in and out of the shadows of brilliance. At times it is superbly written highlighting concepts difficult to present. Gilleard and Higgs point out that postmodernists can spend their scholarly efforts criticizing all that has come before, more in the vein of Powell’s work, and “abandon any hope” of finding “new structures emerging” (p.149). They can attempt to use past paradigms and attempt to apply them to the changed contemporary world, or they can try, as Gilleard and Higgs have done is to explore new pathways to describe what they observe. By lighting a fog-lamp to find their way, Gilleard and Higgs acknowledge that there is risk and uncertainty in how they proceed. But they are willing to explore routes through the fog, even if it results in a dead end or a circuitous trail. While the pathway may be imperfect, others will explore as well and, hopefully, provide a better and more precise map than they may have presented. But they are willing to explore new concepts rather than rest on mere criticism or following what they believe to be outmoded description of a changed society.

It is hard to tell who writes what in the book, Gilleard or Higgs. Who is the John Lennon and who is the Paul McCartney of their duo? Perhaps they work together, line by line, but their reach in the literature, be it economics, philosophy, literature, or sociology, runs deep.

In Chapter 8, Gilleard and Higgs try to make sense of the research findings that we know and the many “paradoxes that surround contemporary later life” (p.150). They conclude that, “The third age is a site of contradictions and contestations: between the interests of nation-state and global markets; between interests of those in positions of ownership of capital and those in positions of control; between those more or less advantaged members of more or less advantaged birth cohorts; and between individualizing experience of aging and the collective responses to it. (p.165).” From the point of view of Gilleard and Higgs, the third age is a “malleable field” that changes based on different groups entering later life at different time periods and so our theories need to reflect this fluidity, adjusting as needed over time. Gilleard and Higgs even raise the issue of the circumstances of “luck” resulting in dramatically different outcomes in later life. That is, some Americans were fortunate enough to have been employed at Microsoft, while others were at Enron. Relative affluence in retirement may depend on the years of when one invests in the stock market and then exits, with some cluster of years resulting with a period of double-digit losses, while the same number of years at a different time period could leave the investor walking away with double-digit gains to their retirement nest egg. Timing, location, circumstance, the economy, world events all unfold in different ways for different individuals.

King and Calasanti in *Aging, Globalization and Inequality* remind us that a “Global North” perspective, one that is preoccupied with the developed world, is
limited. Further, other parts of the world may not seek to evolve in the same way that has been characteristic of developed nations. While many Americans may be forever looking for the best buy, others find a consumer lifestyle shallow, without deeper meaning, and something to struggle against. Our theories of aging must be robust enough and nimble enough for us to develop concepts that can explain the aging society in the developing as well as the developed world. Although this has not yet been achieved, the questions are being asked and the scholarly contributions are plentiful.

We don’t know what will be next from Gilleard and Higgs but we can be assured that they will continue to enrich our thinking with brightened fog-lamps and leitmotifs. As their work gains more visibility, we will see other authors building on what they have provided and, just as many, if not more, criticizing what they have written. Perhaps it will be Phillipson or Walker, or even Gilleard and Higgs who will consider a theory of aging that explains the social forces underlying aging in a culture hostile to Western ways. Such is the advancement of knowledge and understanding, with gerontological thought benefiting from the process.

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