

CHAPTER 6

Reciprocal Co-Optation: The Relationship of Critical Theory and Social Gerontology

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The relationship between age and critical theory may be characterized as a relation of reciprocal co-optation. By co-optation I mean that an idea or principle is accepted, but is reframed to fit within the assumptions of one or more preexisting paradigms. Therefore, its power is diluted at the same time that it is heralded as a new contribution. When co-optation is reciprocal, it of course poses a double challenge. This chapter suggests that such a condition of reciprocal co-optation has characterized the relation between age and critical theory. The first part of the chapter discusses the co-optation of critical theory by the wider discourse in social gerontology, and the second takes up the co-optation of the problem of aging by critical theory.

THE CO-OPTATION OF CRITICAL THEORY BY GERONTOLOGY

As articulated in social gerontology, critical theory incorporates both structural and hermeneutic perspectives on sociological analysis. The first of these deals with issues of political economy and distributive justice—of material inequality, its consequences, and the processes that sustain it; the second with human wholeness—with the relationship of consciousness and the symbolic apparatus to the material conditions of life, both at the individual level and at the sociocultural level. I contend that critical scholarship on aging has encountered tendencies toward co-optation in each of these domains, and this chapter supports that contention by presenting an example from each.

**THE STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVE:
AGING AND AGEISM, COHORT PROCESSES,
AND CUMULATIVE ADVANTAGE**

Exposing Ageism: A Legacy of the Sociology of Age

In articulating the presence of oppressive social conditions, aging is a field in which critical theory hardly has a monopoly. It is perhaps ironic that some of the most notable pioneers of social gerontology and the sociology of age introduced data, concepts, and analytical perspectives demonstrating that age and the processes of individual aging show considerable variation across history and culture. Thus, they demonstrated that age cannot be reduced to individual-level formulas that assume aging is a universal process; this work always implied, and sometimes made explicit, that such intellectual microfication masked a need for institutional critique (Hagestad & Dannefer, 2001). As prominent examples, Irving Rosow's early critique of retirement and old age suggested that retirement might be more accurately thought of as a "roleless role." Others, such as Bernice Neugarten (1983) and Leonard Cain (1964), offered similar critiques. Vern Bengtson (1973) suggested that aspects of debility in old age could be redefined in terms of labeling theory, and Jaber Gubrium's early work on nursing home life demonstrated powerfully the relevance of a constructivist, interactionist approach to aging (1975, 1976). Most systematic and perhaps most radical of all, Marilda Riley and colleagues argued that age is a property not just of individuals but of social structure and institutions. Like the Riley group, Robert Butler (1975) argued for a need to rethink the shape of social institutions with respect to age. And across disciplines, scholars who documented the importance of the cohort (Balties & Schaie, 1968; Elder, 1999; Schaie, 1965; Uhlenberg, 1978) in accounting for age-related patterns and outcomes provided some of the most powerful evidence to compel the questioning of traditional notions of aging.

Thus, prior to the development of a distinctly critical approach to aging, the work of these gerontological scholars challenged the assumptions that age is a natural, biologically inevitable, and individual-level phenomenon, and their work also contained a critique, although often largely implicit, of the institutional arrangements and practices that oppressed older people prior to the development of a distinctly critical approach. While such critiques generally focused less on the directly exploitative aspects of existing institutions, they were compelling, and they provided concepts and tools of general use identifying and articulating the role of social forces in aging: though the contributions of such scholarship, both the confounding of history and age (via disentangling the effects of cohorts) and the confounding effects of illness, impoverishment, and prejudicial stereotypes with aging, have been identified as fallacies that have contributed to the stigmatization and oppression of the older people in modern societies and have

contributed to what Riley and associates called "structural lag" (Riley & Riley, 1994). In the United States, these voices provided a disciplined analytical framework of empirical social science to add legitimacy to the efforts of effective social movements and lobbies that gave voice to an increasingly large aging population, so that both the economic (Preston, 1984) and cultural (Marquie, Cau-Barelle, & Volkoff, 1998; McNaught, 1994; Thomas, 2004) positions of older people changed markedly over the past half century.

Intracohort Inequality and the Phenomenon of Cumulative Advantage/Disadvantage

Nevertheless, some significant ideas have been inspired by a distinctly critical approach to aging and social structure and have received some attention in the sociology of aging and in social gerontology over the past two decades. Yet these, too, have been challenged by alternative interpretations that co-opt them by a reductionist, individual-level reframing. One such idea is the concept of cumulative advantage/disadvantage.

Cumulative advantage/disadvantage (Crystal, 2003; Dannefer, 1987, 1988, 2003; Hagestad, 1992; O'Rand, 1996) offers a contemporary example of the co-optation of a *structural* concept. This notion invites an analysis of aging as a collective process of intracohort stratification, as social processes allow advantage to cumulate in the life experience of some individuals and disadvantage of others, over the collective life course of a cohort. The end result, *ceteris paribus*, is that greater extremes of affluence and poverty are found within the older population than within other age strata.

As one of the early advocates of this concept of intracohort stratification and cumulation, I can attest to the hope—shared by other early researchers in this area—that this notion would stimulate a more direct acknowledgment of the causative power of social arrangements over the life course of cohorts and of individuals and of the human costs of these arrangements. Speaking personally, I had hoped that if it could be recognized that a systematic process of increasing stratification were an integral part of the life of each cohort, the inadequacies of the microfication and individual-level reductionism would be clear, and the importance of paying systematic attention to the power of social forces in understanding the phenomena of aging would become unavoidably apparent. Indeed, issues of cumulative advantage/disadvantage and other aspects of intracohort diversity in equality have received an increasing amount of attention over the last several years, and the need to get beyond characterization of age strata in modal or average terms are ideas that have been accepted within sociology and neighboring disciplines (Bales, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999; Bass, Kutza, & Torres-Gil, 1990; Caspi & Moffitt, 1993; Crystal & Shea, 2003; Kelley-Moore & Ferraro, 2003; Maddox & Lawton, 1988; O'Rand, 1996; O'Rand & Henretta, 1999; Pallas, 2002).

However, the associated (and from a critical perspective, crucially important) idea that inequality-generating processes of social reproduction can properly be thought of as a major *causal factor* has not been widely accepted in gerontology. It has been challenged by at least two alternative "explanations" of increasing inequality over the life course, both based on individual-level processes. These may be termed "choice" or "fare."

Choice refers to the presumption that the greater reason for increasing heterogeneity and stratification with age is *not* cumulating advantages or losses, but rather the unique individuality of each person and the efficacy of each individual's agentic force to craft a life plan and lifestyle that cannot be reduced to developmentally determined patterns or social-science generalization. Some scholars have thus speculated that the differentiation of aging cohorts may reflect the flourishing of individuality with the advent of retirement (e.g., Atchley, 1997; Heinz, 2002; Hickey, 1980), which may "open up" new space for individual expression. Advocates of this perspective may proclaim in an almost celebratory affirmation of human uniqueness. For example, Atchley (1999, p. 89) argues that "... retirement frees both men and women to take part in activity at a level closer to their ideal." Since social roles no longer impose restrictions upon individuality, diversity flourishes and inequality emerges among the aged. Rather than requiring a concern with a scientific explanation, choice thus celebrates the sanctity of individual free expression.

This emphasis coincides, interestingly, with the targeting of the aged by advertisers as a significant new market. As financial security and affluence have begun to characterize a broader segment of the aged population, they have been embraced, with increasing intensity, by corporate product developers and advertisers, whether for new low-carb frozen dinners, ocean cruises, or pharmaceuticals for a host of age-related maladies (see Binstock, 2003; Ekerdt, 2003; Douhit, this volume; Katz, this volume).

It is true that such commercials may increasingly present a relatively positive and sometimes even vibrant view of older people that in some respects contradicts the negative stereotypes of old age in modernity. In that respect, ironically, the advertising industry may serve as a social force for positive macrolevel change in the cultural imagery of the aged, one that is probably resonant with conventional gerontological images of successful aging. This is true even when one factors in the pharmaceutical and other health-related commercials that emphasize age-related health problems (see Katz and Calasanti & King, this volume.) As discussed by Baars and Walker in this volume, the positive, upbeat assessments that are becoming more familiar as media fare have even been endorsed by thoughtful social analysts (e.g., Gilliard & Higgs, 2001) who have been inspired by the recent work on risk and individualization (e.g., Beck & Camiller, 2000; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1995). Yet to take commercials with their images of "successful aging" as evidence that "individual freedom" or "human emancipation" now flourishes in

mature adulthood and retirement would be a serious error for at least two reasons.

First, images of elder affluence and even "greedy geezerism" that are nourished by these images eclipse the now well-documented fact that inequality in resources (and perhaps in health as well) is greatest among the aged, and that many older people, especially older women, have limited discretionary income which, especially in the United States perhaps, is increasingly spent on medicine and healthcare (Estes, 1979, this volume). Moreover, the inequality observed within the older age strata underestimates the effects of lifelong economic inequalities in another way: A disproportionate number of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have been prematurely removed from the population by mortality (Crystal & Weather, 1996; Dannefer, 1988).

Second, such commercial and other media portrayals of successful aging must also be questioned even for those who are economically well off. Historians and sociologists working within a range of traditions, including critical theory, have documented the deliberate and remarkably effective use of advertising to shape consumer demand and taste (e.g., Cohen, 2003; Ewen, 1976, 1999; Wexler, 1977). In view of the pervasiveness of such commercial forces, the "real self" celebrated by symbolic interactionists as a triumph of modernity (Turner, 1976) is actually, in which include not only the consumerism promoted in commercial media but also the pronouncements of "professional experts" concerning normal development and aging, mental health, and so on. This brings us to *fate*, the second alternative explanation for increasing diversity and inequality.

Fate refers to a sense of inevitability and predetermination. In the context of discussions of increasing divergence and diversity over the life course, its technical term is "accentuation"—a concept that has been used uncritically by sociologists as well as psychologists. Accentuation refers to a presumption of fixed intraindividual characteristics that become more and more pronounced with the passage of time. This notion, which accounts for increasing inequality primarily on the basis of processes that originate within the organism and are fixed early in the life course, is alive and well. For example, Caspi and Moffitt (1993) proposed an aggressive sociobiological formulation that not only could be used to account for heterogeneity and inequality in terms of prefixed personality differences but also argued that social structure actually serves as a brake on such differentiation. Periods of social change, they argued, which entail institutional breakdown or upheaval, would permit essential and possibly suppressed aspects of personality to flourish and express themselves (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993; see also Light, Grigsby, & Bligh, 1996).

In sum, the notion of increasing heterogeneity and inequality with age itself has found some receptivity: it has contributed to a growing interest in the phenomena of differentiation and stratification among the aged. At the same time, however, its critical force has often been reframed in reductionistic and individualistic terms

in which social structure again becomes invisible. Thus, instead of contributing to a rejection of naturalistic accounts of organismically based individual aging or existentially based freedom of choice, a substantial force of gerontological argument has sought to interpret the phenomenon of intracohort stratification as a further substantiation of those accounts. It should be noted that, despite their persistence and robustness, it cannot be said that these impulses to microfication have succeeded. A growing body of work continues to document the primacy of social class and other resource effects on health over the life course, supplying a steady stream of evidence of the power of social forces in shaping individual outcomes (e.g., Crystal & Shea, 2003; Daniels, Kennedy, Kawachi, Cohen, & Rogers, 2000; Farmer, 2001; Marmot, 2004).

The Hermeneutic Perspective: Alienation and Meaning

The hermeneutic dimension pertains to the nature of consciousness and meaning. The issue of *meaning* has been a theme of efforts to apply a critical theory to aging on at least two levels. One level entails a concern with an ideological role specific to behavioral and social-science theories that naturalize and legitimize existing social and economic arrangements (Baars, 1991; Dannefer, 1989, 1999; Estes, 1979; Philipson, 1982; Stein, 2003; Walker, 1981).

A second level has concerned the need to attend to the actual experience and meaning of aging. This need has been expressed by those concerned to develop a critical approach since the early paper of Marshall and Tindale (1978), who asserted that social gerontology "neglects genuine human concerns" (p. 65) in favor of the study of prestructured attitudes and quantifiable performance characteristics that are easy to measure. Since then, this point has received frequent emphasis by scholars from history, literary criticism, and philosophy, as well as sociology (e.g., Achenbaum, 1991; Andrews, 1991; Cole, Achenbaum, Jakobi, & Kastenbaum, 1992; Cole & Gadow, 1986; Kastenbaum, 1992; Moody, 1996; Weiland, 1992). A common theme of these diverse writings is the contention that a careful look at the experience of aging from the subject's perspective may reveal strengths and abilities that cannot be discerned or accessed through structured measures. For example, Moody (1988) wrote that "Critical gerontology" would seek to thematize the subjective and interpretive dimensions of aging" and that, through the careful analysis of these dimensions, it could reveal positive but neglected aspects of aging such as wisdom and creativity (pp. 35-36). More generally, he proposes that "critical theory" as applied to gerontology can encompass perspectives drawn from the humanities and cultural study and the critique of positivism, as well as the political economy tradition (Moody, 1996, p. 244).

The general concern with meaning and subjectivity had become a subtheme of some leading scholars in gerontology for a long time, well before its identification with a critical approach (e.g., Butler, 1975; Clayton & Birren, 1982; Neugarten, 1983; Riley, 1978). Thus, the general point that the firsthand experience of aging

needs careful and systematic attention has received a sympathetic reception. Such writings may have contributed to a broad "mainstream" recognition of a problem of "ecological validity" (e.g., Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, & Smith, 1993).

Over the past two decades, this general concern has manifested in the objectives and designs of several important research enterprises, several of which have even taken up "wisdom"—that most elusive and daunting of concepts that is traditionally associated with age—as a topic for study. These include the work initiated by Birren and associates (Birren & Fisher, 1990; Clayton & Birren, 1982), the MacArthur Project on Successful Middle Development, and recent efforts to "operationalize" wisdom by researchers in both North America (e.g., Ardelt, 2003) and Europe. Especially important for the sophistication, dedication, and energy brought to bear upon the problem of wisdom are the efforts of the Wisdom Project at the Max Planck Institute in Berlin (e.g., Baltes, 2004; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001; Staudinger, 1998, 1999.)

It is encouraging to observe serious efforts by social and behavioral scientists to move beyond a reliance on those characteristics that can be measured through standardized and prestructured instruments and to countenance a broader set of *capabilities* and concerns of aging individuals. In assessing such efforts, however, it is important to keep clearly in mind the position of meaning, subjectivity, and conscious experience within the framework of critical theory. In the critical tradition, subjectivity is an essential node of analysis because it is understood that consciousness is the basis of human action at the same time that the regulation of human action is essential to social order. This regulation typically requires a degree of legitimization of the social order, which in all known societies involves a mystification of the connection between the productive labor of individuals and the reproduction of the social order. Inevitably, then, a measure of *false consciousness* is inherent in everyday meaning structures. Thus, a critical analysis cannot proceed without a continuous moment of sociopolitical self-reflexiveness or without a systematic effort to clarify the linkages between consciousness and subjective meaning and the cultural, economic, and political contexts within which social actors are located (Andrews, 1991; Baars, 1991; Dannefer, 1999; Habermas, 1978).

Although the growing concern with meaning and subjectivity in social gerontology may be accompanied by a growing recognition of the importance of the self-reflexive moment as an integral aspect of both wisdom and efforts to theorize about wisdom (Baltes, 2004), it is typically a reflexivity of *microfication* (Hagestad & Dannefer, 2001), in which larger issues of social location as well as political and cultural awareness are not explicitly considered and thus remain invisible. Wisdom-related strengths such as "life insight" (Staudinger, in press) can certainly not be reduced to sociopolitical awareness. From a critical perspective, however, "life insight and wisdom" cannot be achieved while the problem of the relation between individual and collective interest with one's

political and social location remain invisible. This becomes even more salient and more urgent as a "critique of wisdom studies" as scholars of wisdom adopt morality and virtue more explicitly as elements of wisdom (Baltes, 2004; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000.) By assuming a universal character of consciousness, meaning, wisdom, etc., it fails to consider the extent to which individualized reflexivity itself is part of an apparatus of social reproduction—the extent to which ecological destruction or multinational violence is advanced by the everyday practice of wisdom and virtue.

A similar problem of microfication has also applied to discussions of meaning offered from scholars working in the humanities. Here, even those associated with a critical perspective have often not been very distinct from other gerontological writing based on efforts to depict meaning. While valuable for both the analytic frames and the insights they offer, such writings differ from a distinctly critical approach in at least two respects. First, as in the case of the wisdom studies described above, they are characterized by a microfication—a depoliticized and dehistoricized reduction that does not analyze the social-structural frames within which meaning is generated, neglecting Marx's classic observation that "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves . . ." (1852 [1972], p. 437). Second, they sometimes suggest a universalization of concepts that may be culture specific, e.g., "legitimation of biography" (Marshall, 1980), or "journey of life" (Cole, 1991; Kenyon, 1991). Perhaps the concern to permit the power and authenticity of the actors' voices to be heard—without question a well justified concern—has allowed the need to analyze those voices in terms of their social and cultural circumstances to be obscured. As Bhavani observes, "empowerment and 'having a voice' are not . . . the same, although the two are often conflated. . . ." (1990, pp. 145-146). If the result of a lack of analysis of voice in terms of its linkages to factors of class, ethnicity, cohort specificity, etc. is to permit an implicit (or explicit) universalization of concepts, it risks the same kind of disempowering and legitimating function that has been attributed to traditional organicist theories. Since many of the writings on meaning to which I refer have not been produced by sociologists, but by those working in other fields of the social sciences and humanities (e.g., Cole & Gadow, 1986; Moody, 1988; Weiland, 1989, 1993), it may be that this is a place where the sociological foundations of critical theory are especially needed and can make a particular contribution.

As it stands, such discussions of meaning are detached not only from their structural moorings but also from the extensive literature that provides a critical analysis of the modern self—of a self that is, for example, commodified (Wexler, 1983), narcissistic (Lasch, 1979), saturated (Gergen, 1991), or subjectivized (Berger, Berger, & Kellner, 1973; Dannefer, 1981). These analyses offer themes that might be expected to surface in accounts of the subjective experience of aging individuals in late capitalism. Possible themes include despair, borne of the

recognition of the futility of accumulation or of too much time squandered on unfulfilling consumerist pursuits or of memories of blocked opportunities for love and work that leave the actor with a sense of irretrievable loss. Under such circumstances, it is likely to be adaptive for an individual to find a "legitimation of biography," even if it involves a degree of self-deception. But if such themes of critical psychology and cultural analysis are not found in literature, it is reasonable to ask why this is the case. At least three hypotheses suggest themselves.

First, a *cohort* hypothesis would suggest that those cohorts now old did not experience the particular assaults to the self described by the critical theorists of self, rather these aged cohorts—who compose what in the United States has been called "the greatest generation" (Brokaw, 1998) and have endured enormous economic upheaval and war experiences as well as unprecedented technological progress—have, as a whole, a different range of experiences and structures of self than those described by critical analysts who focus on the consequences for the self of institutional forces that hit the young and middle-aged most directly. Although this may be an important factor to consider, the incidence of depression and related psychological maladies indicates the insightful voices published in the literature are not representative of the meaning states of many of those currently aged.

Second, a *sampling* hypothesis would suggest a selection effect: that the often moving and profound character of voices that are heard in many published accounts are chosen for their inspirational value. They represent the strong and wise voices of those who are "aging successfully," at least on the dimensions of insight and reconciliation of oneself. Indeed, the state of the literature (critical literature included) on the subjective meaning of age reminds one of where the sociology of age more generally was about two decades ago. In each case, there is a concern to debunk anti-age myths and to generalize a positive and implicitly homogenous depiction of the aged, in neither case is there a deconstruction of the problems of phenomena in question.

Third, a *measurement* hypothesis concerns how adequately the accounts of meaning provided by respondents reflect their actual sense of self and of their lives, versus some idealized version of it. Many are reluctant to focus on or to express despairing or regretful accounts of precious "water under the bridge." This possibility confronts us head on with a problem of false consciousness that is especially delicate in the study of the aged. The general problem it raises is whether "legitimation of biography" is, under some or all conditions, just such an ideological adjustment—a form of false consciousness. This difficult question poses a deep and central dilemma for a critical analysis of age: If the aged uniformly have come to terms with their past experience in a way that legitimates it, reframing its alienated, painful, and constrictive aspects, is that not a valuable and even admirable adaptation at the individual level? On the other hand, how, were this the case, could one apply a critique of modern consciousness or of oppressive institutions, for that matter, to the aged? For this would imply that we

come to the end of life, after all is said and done, with a reservoir of inner strength to draw upon, to bring sense and value to patterns of activity that were for years repressed, hyperhabituated, and constricted.

It is difficult at best to adjudicate among these three hypotheses. However an alternative and perhaps more constructive approach to dealing with this issue is to observe the aging individuals whose lives have been committed to a constructive human cause and who therefore have a radically different sense of meaning than those who live in a relatively uncritical acceptance of modern society. One source of data on such individuals is available from Molly Andrews' unusual study of socialists in Great Britain who were born in the early twentieth century (birthdates 1899-1917). According to Andrews' account, these individuals were unable to speak of the meaning of their own lives without a sense of participation in an ongoing movement and with a deep hope for a future they will not live to see. For example, an 85-year-old woman stated, "... I seriously thought and hoped I would live to see a Socialist Society in my lifetime, but it is not to be so all one can do is to put into practice as far as one can in your relationships and never be afraid to speak where there is injustice. We are still working very hard" (Andrews, 1991, p. 205). Another 85-year-old activist said, "I know I'll never turn the world around by myself... you don't know where you're dropping a seed... the seed will grow; it's not one individual, if you convince one individual and she convinces another, this is the only way that you'll succeed" (1991, p. 199).

These accounts contrast dramatically with those aged individuals in modern society who Kaufman, like others, has found, "did not talk about their lives in relation to social trends or the times in which they lived. They did not place themselves in a broader historical context" (1986, p. 22). Andrews shows not only that the aging activists she studied are focused on the collective future rather than the private past but also that they emphasize certain human strengths, such as patience and staying power, as distinct advantages of age. Interestingly, the sense of historical and social engagement articulated by these aged activists may most closely approximate the late-life stock taking of successful entrepreneurs, who often express gratification in the belief that their work positively changed the world and has provided employment and upgraded living standards for their employees (e.g., Brayer, 1996; Ford, 1926). It is possible to notice several themes in common across these two dramatically divergent classes of biography: a sense of purpose and intention, a sense of control over one's activities, a sense of effort well placed and of meaningful legacy.

Traditional and putatively universal psychological categories, including life review, (Butler, 1963; e.g., Staudinger, 1998) ego integrity, and perhaps even legitimization of biography, seem curiously irrelevant in describing these lives. And it has been shown that such constructs have, for all their popularity, a surprisingly narrow empirical base (Lamme & Baars, 1993). While one might contend that the statements made by these activists are precisely part of a subjective process of legitimating their biographies, the focus of Andrews' respondents

on collective and historical concern diverges dramatically from the individual-level and familistic preoccupations that seem to characterize life review. Thus, they suggest, at minimum, the need for a typology of legitimization of biography and probably one with multiple dimensions (e.g., collective vs. individual orientation and future vs. past oriented). Any such typology could then be related to structural experiential characteristics in the background of individuals' lives. The diverse and apparently expanding array of configurations of living arrangements for the aged both in the United States (e.g., Streib, 1993) and in Europe (Baars & Thomése, 1994; Hagestad, 1992) reflect the lengthening life course and provide a set of natural laboratories for exploring the course of subjective experience under diverse social and cultural conditions.

In sum, the mission of a critical approach to aging includes the analysis of both 1) inequality in material resources, and 2) diversity and inequality in symbolic and cognitive resources. These tasks have been deflected by the adoption of insights from critical analyses by mainstream theory, which enhances its legitimation and maintains its dominance. The hegemonic tendencies of mainstream theory thus continue to serve an ideological function, absorbing critiques while blunting criticism of institutions and practices.

THE CO-OPTATION OF THE PROBLEM OF AGE BY CRITICAL THEORY

As indicated by the above examples, numerous aspects of the sociology of aging and social gerontology are ripe for critical analysis. They lend themselves to a straightforward and compelling critique of much work focused on aging in the social and behavioral sciences. Yet one consequence of a single-minded focus on such critique may be to allow critical scholars to avoid the challenge that the phenomena of aging pose for a critical approach. It obscures the challenge between, on one hand, coming to terms with real constraints that, in the physical ontogeny of development and aging, seem to impose on the aging body, and add their own "surplus constraints." It obscures the fact that human lives have a dynamic, organismic material basis that is practically constrained at the biological level by parameters that do impose boundaries upon what is socially possible (Dannefer & Perlmutter, 1990; Poner, 1974).

Those ontogenetic constraints may bear little resemblance to the arbitrary role assumptions that are imposed by current social arrangements (Andrews, 1991; Best, 1980; Riley & Riley, 1994). Nevertheless, once one gets beyond the childhood years, critical theory has offered very little positive acknowledgment of aging as an integral part of living and constructive meaning. While many biological, psychological, and social patterns associated with age are historically and socially conditioned, aging intrinsically involves the universal cumulation of temporal experience and memory, and the concomitant potentials

for a seasoning of experience and maturation of perspective. And despite the dangers of naturalizing socially constituted aspects of aging, it must be recognized that biological contingencies of vulnerability, loss, and mortality must ultimately confront every individual who lives to a reasonable age. In short, the organism—one's own body and those of others to whom one is related—embodies sets of material processes to which critical theory, including critical approaches to gerontology, have been conveniently oblivious.

It is undoubtedly easier to point to the mechanisms that generate poverty and inequality among the aged, to illustrate the psychological and social oppression of traditional roles, and to analyze processes of social construction and the ideological functions of theories, than it is to take the task of developing an understanding of the meaning, value, and positive possibilities of a long life constructed in relation to others and in a particular sequence of social and historical locations, one day at a time. Ultimately this must be done; even if there were no oppressive roles, the wisdom and insight that come from a long accumulation of experience would mean that a 70-year-old could not be interchanged with a teenager, to whom the firsthand memories and lessons of a half century are currently unavailable.

Nevertheless, a fine line exists between accepting a configuration of age-graded roles as legitimate when they are actually artifacts of a particular social structure and advocating a vision of complete age-irrelevance as a value, an objective, and a possibility. If one argues that the aged have been oppressed by arbitrary roles and cultural stereotypes, the immediate logical response is to negate those roles and reject those stereotypes and to suspect any assertion that give them a special or qualitatively different character, just as one would reject such assertions made on the basis of cultural differences to avoid engaging in racism.

It may be a useful or necessary heuristic to take such a position at one moment in an analysis. It may offer the most compelling aspect of the analysis. I believe it is also the easiest—the one-dimensional project of "macho Marxists" (Pinar, 1994). And to let it stand without confronting the special meaning of age in articulating a theory that is intrinsically historical is to leave central problems unresolved, and these problems are not merely academic. On what basis, for example, does critical theory oppose the glib superficiality of some versions of "successful aging" or the vision of immortality offered by the "anti-aging industry" (see King & Calasanti, this volume, and also Beckman & Ames, 1998; Binstock, 2003; Kurzweil & Grossman, 2004; Olshansky, Hayflick, & Perls, 2004). While many proponents of the latter can be readily dismissed as crass profiteers, to focus only on its economic opportunism does not resolve the deeper tension between the possibility of social transformation that enhances the life chances of all, with the acceptance of the realities of physical suffering and death as essential elements in the life course (Kleinman, 2004).

Thus, the phenomena of aging pose a challenge to critical theory that is equally fundamental and ultimately more formidable than the challenge to social

gerontology posed by critical theory. Ultimately, a critical theory of aging should aspire not only to an exposure of oppressive structures and ideological theories but to the articulation of an understanding of how to balance an assault on the "surplus suffering" produced by human ignorance and injustice with the recognition that physical and other personal suffering and loss are not only ultimately unavoidable but can be a source of human wisdom, strength, growth, and learning.

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