**Old age and the neoliberal life course**

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**Introduction**

In this chapter I look at the way the life course, in its reconstruction within a neoliberal framework over the past several decades, has shaped a version of old age that contrasts strikingly with what preceded it, both in terms of its meaning and its relationship to other stages. The increased valorization of youthful, productive qualities has had the effect of rendering old age meaningless at best (the aim being to pass as young for as long as possible) in the third age, and tragic and pitiful where this is not possible in the fourth. This has had a profoundly gendered impact, where the fourth age is not just a condition that affects more women than men, but is also one which achieves its symbolic apotheosis in the figure of the abject old woman. In what follows I will trace this development and suggest ways in which this trend be modified in a revisioning of both old age and the life course per se.

**The life course, modernity and old age**

Old age, like any other stage of life, can only be understood within the framework of the life course, because the stages relate to each other, deriving their meanings in relation to each other and from the framework itself. The latter is inseparable from notions of time and temporality and intersects powerfully with gender and other systems of stratification. The ‘age system’ forms an important part of the governmentality of modernity, classifying and dividing people according to age and intersecting with a range of other stratifying systems such as class and gender to facilitate the embedding of inequalities as well as introduce inequalities of its own (Calasanti and Slevin, 2006; Pickard, 2016). In order to fully appreciate its role, as well as the place of old age within it, it is necessary first of all to consider what the life course of (late) modernity replaced.

In medieval times ages and stages related to each other differently where a religious dimension meant that ‘each age is equidistant from God, who stresses their subordinate but equal status’ (Dove 1988: 15). Nor did age and stage make sense without being seen as rooted in an entire lifecycle. In addition, the concept of spiritual ages imparted a unique value to age, in a way that contrasts with modern associations. So we find the idea that one was likely to be more spiritually developed as one aged. As Tom Cole (1992) notes ‘the concept of spiritual ages [just checking that this shouldn’t be ‘ageing’?] allowed for the paradoxical unity of physical decline and spiritual ascent’ (1992: 6). It was possible to be a wise child (‘“puer senex’’grave and wise beyond his years’ (Dove 1986: 36) as well as a youthful old person (‘senex fortis’), such states deriving their meaning from spiritual advancement and associated with the ideal of age transcendence. It was agedness of the soul that counted (Burrow, 1988).

The modern life course, on the other hand, organised ages and stages according to an entirely different rationale, both in terms of their relationality and their role and meaning in society. With the emergence of the ‘life course’ framework the ages of life became the ‘stages of life’, associated with the civilizing process that moved from externally imposed discipline to internalized processes of self-control. There were specific roles and tasks associated with each life stage, quite separate and distinct from other stages and associated with the major institutions of modernity. These included school, the workplace and retirement whilst a range of discourses and associated experts served to reify each age. For old age, geriatric medicine worked with the institution of retirement to construct an old body and old self that differed essentially from both a youthful and ‘adult’ body (the language of geriatric medicine separated ‘geriatrics’ from ‘adults’). Geriatric medicine announced different norms of health and bodily functioning that required expert understanding (Pickard, 2010); this turned the aged person into a creature fantastic in its otherness, like the Aged Parent in Dickens’ *Great Expectations*]. Policy also reified the old, treating them as another species of citizen, in the way that medicine treated them as another species of human, whose ‘burdensome’ nature or ‘conservative’ tendency was potentially ruinous to the rest of society. Psychology and psychoanalysis added their input stressing that development took place only in the earlier years of life.

Within this new conception of the life course time assumed a different form, becoming linear and unidirectional, and the meaning of travelling through the life course was constituted by a ‘decline’ narrative (Gullette, 1997). In symbolic terms, a new iconographic representation of the life course as staircase had emerged by the sixteenth century, rising and falling in a pyramid shape with connotations of progress followed by decline clearly adumbrated in that form. Other imagery representing the life course that appeared throughout modernity include variously: life as a pilgrimage or journey; as a game; as a series of stages linked to Darwinian evolution, economic growth or developmental psychology (Mintz, 2015). All reflect the underlying staircase pattern giving particular emphasis to childhood and youth. For example, of Erikson’s (1997) eight stages of psychosocial development six are concerned with the period from infancy to youth positioned on the ascent and only two concerned with adulthood and old age. Within this system the old had no real purpose in the present, their task being either to look back in their own life, resolving the conflicts from earlier points left undone, or else to devote themselves to serving the young, thus acting in two senses as curators of the past. Over this period time was constituted as a limited commodity not unlike money – a time economy suited to the organisation of the capitalist workforce - and one of the ideas associated with the Reformation was that it could run out before one attained salvation (Cole, 1992). This was accompanied by a shift from ‘contemplation’ being considered the highest pursuit to an emphasis placed on activity, which again fitted with the centrality of ordinary life (Taylor, 1985). Later, but not until the twentieth century with the fourth stage of the epidemiological transition (Olshansky and Ault, 1986), we have a complementary shift culturally and philosophically from a central importance given to mortality to an emphasis on ‘natality’ (in the words of Hannah Arendt) and hence the privileging of youth over old age (Neiman, 2014).

The life course also instated a paradigm switch in the relationship between age and youth and their respective values vis-a-vis each other. Capitalist practices, especially the mode of production and advertising associated with it from the 1920s onwards, attached notions of progress and productivity firmly to youth. The shift can be traced through fashion where, Cohen (2012) notes, the fin de siècle, middle-aged women were the embodiment of stylishness, with younger women considered ‘raw’ and ‘awkward’ by comparison. This changed in the 1920s with the new industrial methods including Taylorization [[1]](#endnote-1)[do you need to explain this? I for one don’t know what this means]. Cohen explains: ‘Consumer capitalism … maintains that at the very core of human experience is a desire for what is new…. Advertising and mass industry... turned what was new, and young, into a moral virtue, an economic necessity, and an essential ingredient of personal success’ (2012: 88-9). Today, the increasing individualization that has resulted from the erosion of collective class-based solidarities that accompanied the movement to a service-based economy has further emphasised youthful attributes of flexibility, innovation and the need to create oneself anew. The quintessential manifestation of this is the tech industry which is not just an overtly ageist industry glorying in the ‘natural’ talent of youth, but also one which has committed billions of dollars towards anti-ageing research intent on engineering ageing without growing old. [might be worth referencing places where people can read about this move?]

**Gender and the age system**

Gender has also developed [can you reword? sounds odd] a particular relationship with age and the age system since the advent of modernity and manifests in the symbolic devaluing of the figure of the old woman in particular. The denigration of the body and the association of females and femininity with the body was not an innovation of modernity and indeed its genesis can be traced back to the ancient Greeks [ref]. But with Cartesianism the mind/body split and the association of value with mind (male) and the reviled with the body (female) was new; new also was the particular denigration of old age and femininity as against the positive of youth and masculinity which both require transcending for the attainment of reason (which furthermore was flattened to instrumental rationality) (Bordo, 1986). Importantly, as Susan Bordo has delineated, there was a psychological element to this also, with Cartesian dualism as a process of separation and individuation from the female universe of the old medieval cosmos enabling the emergence of the disenchanted masculine universe of the modern era. This involves interplay between cultural narratives and individual experience which is constantly repeated on an individual level, as in Elias’ (1978) account of how the years’ long development of children replicates on a minute scale the centuries’ long civilizing process undergone by nations. In an account of the ‘dialectics of separation and individuation’ which Bordo offers as a ‘way of seeing the Cartesian era empathetically and impressionistically, through association and image’ (1986: 448) and drawing on psychological categories normally used to describe individual development, she highlights the links between scientific objectivism, the rejection of the body and the establishment of the motif of the Hag as emblematic of all the forces of dissolution threatening patriarchal rationalist society. One way through which this separation is effected is by the association of the female body with the abject (Kristeva, 1982). This abject quality pertains to lack of control, inherent in incontinence, bleeding, lactation and suckling, the ambiguous boundaries of self and other in pregnancy, the vulnerability of a body *in time*, a body with an animal or vegetable quality of immanence from which state the (masculine) self seeks to distance itself. Undesirable or uncomfortable qualities are projected onto women and older people such that if, as Mary Douglas (1966) suggests, the body is always a social body providing, through its boundaries and conventions, a clue to social mores, then the feminine body is marked by the social most of all, and the older female body is its epitome. Dorothy Dinnerstein suggests:

‘The child’s bodily tie to the mother... is the vehicle through which the most fundamental feelings of a highly complex creature are formed and expressed... this tie is the prototype of the tie to life. The pain of it, and the fear of being cut off from it, are prototypes of the pain of life and the fear of death’ (1976: 34).

Concurring with Norman Brown [ref], Dinnerstein links the socio-cultural denial of death – including the horror of signs of ageing and senescence – with our early recognition of bodily vulnerability. Woman (or Mother standing for all female bodies) is henceforth considered ‘representative of the body principle in all of us that must be repressed when we embark on any significant enterprise’ (Dinnerstein, 1976: 126). But if the young mother reminds us of our intractable vulnerabilities, how much more terrible to behold is the old mother, on whose now-withered breasts we, who are no-longer-children, once lay our heads? She surely is the ‘night in the entrails of the earth’ of whom Beauvoir (1997:179) identifies as so profoundly terrifying to men.

**Neoliberalism and old age**

Since the 1970s late modernity, enfolded by a neoliberal framework, has reconstituted the life course according to a reworked rationale accompanying the end of the mandatory separation of work from retirement, as well as work from ‘life’, and the enfolding of all citizens in an obligation of productivity. John Macnicol explains: ‘Neoliberalism is both an ideology and a stage of capitalism…(2015 :12) It has become ‘a modern generic term for free market, libertarian ideas ostensibly supporting a minimalist state, the primacy of the deregulated market, the desirability of private provision of goods and services, the sanctity of individual liberty and so on’ (2015 :14). These dual threads converge in the figure of the ideal self, modelled after the productive worker and paying little heed to place in the life course. For all stages work remains the definitive role, one that extends its logic – both practically and in dispositional terms - into childhood and old age, as well as into the domestic and leisure space, and that has furthermore also claimed women, as well as men, giving to their lives the tripartite structure that most did not have in the post-welfare [state?] settlement (Kohli, 2007). This indicates a further stage of individualization in neoliberalism, this time releasing people from their age classes to a large degree and focusing on their individual properties in a new articulation of biopower.

Concurrently the ‘meaning of life’ has been further ‘flattened’, reduced to ‘success’, in terms of autonomy, flexibility, productivity, mediated by choice. This is a million miles away from the approach found in the Arts of Living as discussed by Epictectus, Aristotle’s idea of eudaimonia, or Tolstoy’s articulation of the fundamental questions of existence as ‘what shall we do and how shall we live?’ [I think a juicy footnote encapsulating the key text of these three would be most useful!] The main consequence, from the perspective of old age, has been the division into the ‘third’ and ‘fourth’ ages and the theoretical ending of the institution of retirement. The third age is not old age at all, in the traditional sense: it is agentic and productive, though not necessarily involving paid work; it is youthful and healthy, an identity constructed through lifestyle consumerism (Gilleard, 1998). It involves the broadening of the hegemony of adulthood to the latter years, including in physiological ideals of the body (Pickard, 2012). In Rowe and Kahn’s key expositions on the subject (1987; 1997) ageing was downplayed as a factor influencing health in favour of individual actions: ‘the effects of the ageing process itself have been exaggerated, and the modifying effects of diet, exercise, personal habits, and psychosocial factors underestimated’ (1987: 143). Moreover, successful ageing is a moral as much as medical achievement: both low probability of disease and maintenance of functional capacity are not enough in themselves, and instead the presence of ‘active engagement with life’ is also necessary for truly successful ageing (Rowe and Kahn, 1997: 433). Hereby successful ageing has seamlessly replaced the idea of the good life in old age.

But successful old age also demands the counterpart of a failed old age and this is the role played by the fourth age.‘Frailty’ is the most direct marker of enforced exit from the third age into the dreaded fourth age. Despite an immense and ongoing effort by many geriatricians to define and redefine its aspects, the fourth age remains imprecise definitionally (Pickard, 2014). Again, as a feature of biopower, it is characterized rather by normative views about what it is to be a ‘standard adult’ and what one must alternatively work to fend off for as long as possible. This is because, above all, it is representative of the state of abjection, container for the unwanted attributes that formerly belonged to old age per se, but that now have been jettisoned in order to make possible the third age, and which are distinctly feminine qualities suggesting that it is, above all, the space of the Hag. In medical terms it has both qualitative and quantitative definitions. The qualitative aspects identify it as a specific Other, a phenotype whose attributes are a caricature of femininity lacking in strength, energy, vigour and speed. The quantitative aspects define it in terms of deficit and risk, calculating its proximity to death by means of tabulating its number of deficits, which are then mapped into eight risk regions, from ‘very fit’ to ‘terminally illl’, such as through the frailty index, which calculates degree of frailty, according to the number of deficits that can be counted (Pickard, 2014). However, this ultimately also recognises a qualitative state: by 95, according to Kenneth Rockwood (2005), its chief architect, nearly everyone is frail and indeed it is another example of the staircase metaphor, one that focuses on the downward rungs that recede step by step to death.

In social care, the labelling of an old person as frail in the domiciliary context, which instigates intervention from community nursing teams and possibly thereafter referral to institutional care, results from the fact that ‘someone conceives there to be a *lived problem* with a very old person’ (Kaufman, 1994: 50; original emphasis), by which Kaufman indicates that the descriptive element has not been replaced but subsumed into the professional judgement. For example, one recent ethnographic study of community nursing involvement with frail old people (Skilbeck, 2014) found that a combination of age and physical appearance was used as a marker for classification, where patients were initially described to the researcher as ‘a little, wrinkly old lady’ or a ‘tearful’ and ‘anxious’ lady, with attention also placed on age combined with extreme thinness. Although later functional and social explanations were added, the classification retained the imprint of something impressionistic, based upon recognition of the abject Other, the Hag. It is easy to see the abject body, in all its marginalization, defined by decline, dependence, leakiness, vulnerability and proximity to death in this depiction of a frail old women in a nursing home: ‘“Martine with her chin on her chest, strapped into a chair; Martine with a swollen face, because she has fallen out of bed; Martine badly dressed, one trouser leg hoisted to mid-thigh; Martine with an empty look in her eyes, forgotten in a wheelchair, outside her closed bedroom door”’ (2012: 28). That it is distinct from disability and concerned with the failure of qualities such as independence, autonomy and boundedness associated with the male body is also clear if we note that frailty is much more likely to coincide with difficulty, or outright failure, in terms of performing aspects of independent living (IADLs), such as preparing meals, managing money, shopping for groceries or personal items, performing light or heavy housework, doing laundry and using a telephone, than it is with disability (Pickard, 2014). Indeed disability has been positioned as consistent with social personhood. One reason for this is the attribution to it of ‘agency’ (‘the engagement with life’ factor noted by Rowe and Kahn), which those in the fourth age manifestly do not have (Gilleard and Higgs, 2011). Secondly is its association with the leaky body: incontinence, of which twice as many older women suffer than men, may precipitate the diagnosis, or, at least, the inability to keep incontinence private may do so, given that it is a continuum, and one experienced at all stages of the life course, but usually concealed, as social competence is (mistakenly) equated with continence (Mitteness and Barker, 2000). Whilst frailty is recognized as a real experience by older people it is not something that maps well onto professional classifications of frailty, but rather indicates a state of existential vulnerability, either temporary or more enduring, and is characterised by dependence, anxiety, or simply giving up in the face of overwhelming physical and functional incapacity (see for example Puts et al, 2009; Nicholson et al, 2012) .

In developmental terms, frailty is characterised by loss in two components of intellectual functioning: the ‘mechanics’ (reasoning, spatial orientation, perceptual speed) and the ‘pragmatics’ of cognition, associated with cultural practices and acquired knowledge (Baltes et al, 1999). It presents a mirror image to the Piagetian emphasis on a child’s developing rationality (Baltes and Carstensen, 1996; Baltes and Smith, 2003); an un-development on the downward curve, involving a ‘crumbling’ of qualities like ‘mastery’ and ‘autonomy’ and ‘cognitive potential’ (Baltes and Smith, 2003) that define standard adulthood psychologically. The result of all this structural erosion is that ‘the self is at its limits of functioning in the fourth age’ (2003: 125). This is a depiction, as with the frailty indices, of the staircase of life in its terminal decline, indeed folding in upon itself and slowly collapsing. Despite personality approaches within life course psychology (from Jung to Neugarten, Guttman and Tornstam) that look at the growth and deepening of certain aspects of adult personality, including during the last stages of life, this ‘measuring’ approach means that any personal development that occurs into the fourth age is lost from view, where ‘decline’ and ‘growth’ are seen as antonyms and where qualitative shifts in subjectivity or consciousness gained through suffering and vulnerability (including successfully negotiating the personal challenges associated with them) do not ‘count’: perhaps because our fear of the Hag closes down our imaginative empathy. Again, in another example of a teleological classification, this decline is foretold in the very terms and values selected at the outset, those of autonomy, mastery and separation, against which the fourth age is seen to be wanting. As such it says more about the ideals of adulthood than about ‘old age’ per se, although it fails to subject these former to analysis or hold them up to critique.

**The existential threat of ageing**

If the fourth age is a space onto which unwanted and unpleasant aspects of existential existence is projected - as well as failure to succeed in the terms of late modern capitalism - there is also a sense in which the old retain a dangerous quality, even when they are healthy, functioning and productive. This is the danger expressed through the Freudian Oedipal conflict, today given a particularly late modern twist. A short story in the 2015 collection by the prize-winning Anglo-Pakistani writer Hanif Kureishi provides one example. The ‘Land of the Old’ is about a time in the not-too-distant future when the old have become strong enough to vampirise the young, treating them as property in the various roles of domestic servants, companions, quasi-children and sex slaves, at their will. The old also have the power to decide who, if anyone, is permitted to live beyond the age of 50. Kureishi writes, of the piece’s old anti-hero:

‘They conquered, his generation, flourishing in the new opportunities of capitalism. Soon after, they closed the roads so no one could follow them up, and now they will not let go. It didn’t take them long to see it would be a good idea to enslave the young, whom they patronised, envied and hated, and then, with some exceptions, began to kill off at fifty. For them this was barely murder… ridding the world ..of those, they claimed, they could not afford. Those for whom there was no place.’ (Kureishi, 2015: 173-4).

Similarly, M Night Shyamalan’s 2015 horror movie ‘The Visit’ depicts elderly grandparents, first as vaguely threatening with shades of dark fairy tales such as Hansel and Gretel or Red Riding Hood, and then as overtly bent on murdering their grandchildren in a representation that has been called ‘the most gerontophobic film ever made’ (Robey, 2015). But while the old man is terrifying in his malevolent strength and brooding geriatric ill-will, some of the most terrifying scenes are those involving the ‘grandmother’ who, after bed time, with darkness descended and the children cowering in their bedroom, flies shrieking around the house, clawing at the walls and emitting projectile vomit; a being both monstrous and seemingly possessed by the spirit of senility.

These fictional representations are echoed on the more ‘rational’ level of political discourse which increasingly sets the generations against each other in an ‘age war’ generated largely in the media, focused on either the problem of supporting the ‘burden’ of the poor old fourth agers or equally on the greed and generational advantages enjoyed by the third agers. These latter extend to housing, pensions, educational capital and, in existential terms, their privileged amounts of lifetime luck and success: a flourishing presented as grotesque and unnatural. Such depictions have appeared with great regularity across range of contemporary media sites, deployed from a range of political positions, including the (UK) *Guardian, the New York Times, the Atlantic, the Huffington Post, Time, Forbes, The Daily Telegraph and the* (UK) *Times.* Although the arguments found within these themes are diverse, they all fit within the long-held notion that the older generation is potentially or actually problematic for society at large, a view which increased within the context of the austerity debate, Brexit, and then the election of PresidentTrump. The British journalist Will Hutton chastises his own generation thus:

‘Having enjoyed a life of free love, free school meals, free universities, defined benefit pensions, mainly full employment and a 40-year-long housing boom, they are bequeathing their children sky-high house prices, debts and shrivelled pensions. A 60-year-old in 2010 is a very privileged and lucky human being’ (Hutton, 2010).

Many of the above arguments are also echoed in a vivid indictment by former Liberal Democrat Minister Chris Huhne (2013), again directed against his own generation. He warns: ‘The cost of pandering to pensioner[s?] is social arthritis’, and concludes with a ‘call to arms’: ‘Someone needs to fight the selfish, short-sighted old. They are the past, not the future’ (Huhne, 2013). It seems as if this denigration is one way of asserting a firmly youthful third-age identity, a distancing of self (evident in the pronoun ‘they’ instead of ‘we’) from the spoiled identity of one’s coevals.

The science of anti-ageing is another inevitable concomitant of the neoliberalisation of ageing, made possible at the same time as neoliberalism was emerging in the 1970s with the publication of Tom Kirkwood’s Disposable Soma Theory (Kirkwood, 1977). This brought together arguments that had appeared earlier in the scientific world but placed them within the framework of evolutionary theory, thus seriously challenging the centuries-long belief that death was natural and pre-programmed. It did so by substituting this with the contention that ageing is in fact an oversight of evolution, the result of a number of insults or the delayed effect of certain genes that emerge in post-reproductive phases of life when the germinal line has already secured immortality through reproduction. Ageing, this theory suggests, is not natural and rarely if ever occurs in nature. Appearing within the context of urban civilizations, it is not distinguishable ontologically from chronic disease, making it meaningless scientifically and thereby feeding the broader cultural discourse. Although Kirkwood himself does not support anti-ageing technologies, and whilst there remain strong supporters of the view that ageing is natural, Kirkwood’s theory provides the perfect rationale for the work of anti-ageing scientists intent on finding a ‘cure’ for ageing and death, among them the visionary figure of Aubrey de Grey, as well as more conventional scientists such as Richard Faragher and David Gems, together with a profusion of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs (Friend, 2017). For the ‘immortalists’, according to Bryan Appleyard (2007), time, not space, is the last frontier, and the future, like a desert or the wild west, exists to be occupied and colonised.

**Concluding thoughts: towards an alternative framework for old age**

Whilst the logic of this approach to old age – reviling it and distancing oneself from it – may serve for a time for those with sufficient capitals, even for them it is eventually exhausted in the reality of the finite life and the vulnerability of the flesh. Whatever our personal and cultural wishes and fantasies may be, old age is a fact of life and will remain so for the foreseeable future, and possibly for good, meaning that the impulse to deny and devalue it is fundamentally misplaced, suggestive of a kind of immaturity. There are several possibilities for addressing it in a spirit of mature acceptance. The first is to acknowledge that the category of frailty, however defined and identified, is useful for identifying patients in need of specific intensive medical and social support, and as such requires a well-resourced, sensitive and ethical practice and policy, from which the stigma of ageing as burden is removed. The second is to challenge the neoliberal framing of old age and the life course which, having withdrawn all meaning from old age, approaches it only as a medical category. Whilst we cannot resurrect earlier frameworks of meaning, such as those contained within the Wheel of Life, we can yet draw on them and other philosophies for inspiration [might be worth having a footnote on this - possibly even an illustration if we can get the publishers to agree!]. For example, Thomas Rentsch (2017) uses ‘virtue ethics’ to argue that old age (like any age) is both unique in itself and can only be understood in dialectic interplay with the whole life course. As a result interpretation is required constantly, and here virtue ethics is also helpful in suggesting the guiding principle, not of success, but of *eudaimonia* or flourishing connected to the concept of the good life. Unlike neoliberalism, the latter recognises the different qualities and challenges associated with different stages of the life course linked together by a thread of continuity of self.

In addition, Rentsch points out that there are two ways in which ageing and old age have valuable insights not so accessible earlier in the life course. Firstly, many aspects of modern life, especially its temporal economy, can be challenged where ‘in the tradition of wisdom, to learn from ageing can mean to set concrete practical forms of life, such as slowing down and taking it easy, against the “polar inertia” of late modern processes of technical acceleration, to gain a new sense of the definitive, temporal reality of our lives’ (2017 : 45). Such insights prompt an understanding that the linear, measurable time economy is not ‘time’ at all, but merely one way of organising and regulating people around the primacy of work: a process that also encourages the sense of life stages cut off from each other. For old people themselves, secondly, old age presents the opportunity to gain a more conscious life, to awaken to an understanding of finitude and impermanence, of the human truth of vulnerability and the need for solidarity and interdependence with others. As a result there is a chance for continued self-development in a number of ways, including acceptance and forgiveness of oneself and others for acts committed at previous times; a recognition of life’s true priorities, and a perspective on the final meaning of one’s life, of attaining a sense of plot laid out from beginning to end, of similar effect as if, having spent years walking in a densely tangled labyrinth of streets crowded with buildings, a vista were at last to open up affording one a view of the entire city. The challenges in old age such as bereavement, loss of roles, and of physical capacity belie the suggestion by psychologists and others that one experiences only cognitive decline in old age, and imply rather the chance, not just to develop, but to fulfil oneself in the sense indicated by the old English origin of the word: complete, make full, fill up, which is an enrichment, not diminishment, of the self.

Finally, the gendered aspect of the denial of death is also something that requires a careful work of deconstruction. For example, where Freud identified the twin impulses of sexual desire and fear of death as fundamental to human motivation, history suggests that only one at a time seems able to be expressed and acknowledged openly, whilst the other is repressed. Today the denial of death is as pronounced as the denial of sex was in Victorian times (Rentsch, 1997). The result is the fetishization of both to overcome which requires recognising and bringing both to full consciousness. This would surely lead to a healthier gendered economy, if as Margaret Walker has pointed out, ‘much of western patriarchal prejudice against women can be traced, through labyrinthine pathways of the unconscious, to symbolic fetishization of man’s ultimate fear, the fear of his own final nonexistence’ (p. 19). To accept ageing and death, such reasoning suggests, is to accept the Mother, which necessitates the turning of the Hag into the Crone, taking the latter as a repressed symbol of valued femininity. Informing the practices of child rearing and early education this would be concerned to integrate what has hitherto been split apart in gendered socialization in order that we may become adults wise to the fact that we will all experience both autonomy and dependence, strength and vulnerability, power and fragility, not just at different points in our life time, but at every point. Far from something to be overcome, then, old age is the epitome of what it is to journey through the human life course.

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1. Frederick W Taylor introduced the principles of ‘scientific management’ to work practices in the late nineteenth century factory which involved the rigorous management of time, a process that later spread to other workplaces and some say the home (See Hochschild, 2001: 48-9 for a description both of this practice and of its creep into other realms, especially that of the domestic. The point is also that the time economy provides a measure not just of efficiency and control but of value: time is short and, most importantly, can run out, hence the ever-present fear of obsolescence and the love of the new. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)