Framing the third and fourth ages in the context of the COVID-19

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Introduction

This chapter explores the bifurcation of UK media discourse and imagery in the representation of later life, especially the contrast between the social and cultural imaginaries of the 'third' and the 'fourth' age (Higgs and Gilleard 2015a; Gilleard and Higgs 2014). Evident for some years now, this bifurcation has become more salient in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, where the treatment of older people has been one of the most visible aspects of the entire crisis (Fletcher 2021). The contradictory framing of later life represented by a 'third' versus a 'fourth' age imaginary reflects the fracturing of old age as a social category in contemporary society. At their extremes, these two imaginaries pivot between the expressed fear of growing dependency and an incipient social death associated with an 'apocalyptic demography' of excess agedness (Gee and Gutman 2000), and the anger expressed by the pejoratively termed generation of 'OK boomers' who are judged to have benefited from a disproportionate degree of assets along with the increased means to capitalise on them.

The imaginary of the fourth age has its roots in pre-modern social life when old age was seen as the site of physical illness and financial impoverishment. Formulations of the third age, by contrast, are more recent and have associated it with the ageing of a particular generation - the baby boomer cohorts – and their active engagement with a consumerist culture. These two contrasting discourses have been set in relief by the increasing deployment of demographic data within the public sphere (Hacking 2015). Metaphors of ecological disaster and images of the accumulation of needy old bodies are used to project the need for urgent policy change (Mander 2014). . At the same time, these media discourses of physical

dependency, mental decline and health vulnerability alternate with those concerning 'boomer' ageing that project an image of later life as 'fit, fashionable, functional and flexible' (Marshall and Rahman, 2015). Within the UK, neither mode dominates the media; rather they exist as parallel discourses, as if unconnected to each other, reflecting the Janus like approach to later life evident in many contemporary Western societies. The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic has given a new slant to this double coding of later life, yielding calls for cost benefit analyses regarding the trade-off between the economy and health, and between the interests of different generations (Economist 2020). Questions are raised of whether older people should be understood as a vulnerable group who should be defended against the pandemic, or whether they are an excessively supported segment of the population whose constant demands risk exhausting the economy and society. To address these matters, we begin by outlining what we mean by framing this media debate as a conflict between 'third age' versus 'fourth age' imaginaries[i].

Third age/fourth age

The distinction between a flourishing and a frail old age is not new. Such a division has existed as long as attempts have been made to represent the stages of life (Burrow, 1986). What is distinct about its framing in contemporary Western society is its connection to the economy, to markets, and to the state. There are many different debates about the make-up of the third age, understood as either a 'stage' of life (the young old) or as the later life of a distinct cohort (the baby boom generation). In a number of publications, we have argued in favour of the latter position, arguing that the third age can be best understood in Bourdieusian terms as a distinct 'generational field' formed by the increasing affluence of post-war Western society. This generational field is in large part defined by the historical diffusion of a consumerist

habitus that has steadily extended across the life courses both of those growing up and those growing old during this period (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005; 2011).

Part of the cultural ethos of this generational field is a resistance to all that is perceived to be 'old'. The ageing of post-war youth culture has not seen the abandonment of youthful concerns, so much as their continuing modification and elaboration , first in mid- and now in later-life. It is, in a sense, a generation ageing differently, ageing without becoming seen or thought to be either 'old' or 'old-fashioned'. These aspirations have been, to use a term developed by Louis Althusser (1971) 'interpellated' by a consumerist lifestyle and a retail economy marketing products and services that project 'continuing style' – in the form of cosmetics, diet, fashion, fitness regimes and/or leisure activities – combined with a general resistance to age (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014). Connected to this, a new genre of films, magazines and TV programmes have emerged, incorporating many of the ideals of 'boomer hood' and 'successful' ageing (King, 2014).

At the same time, a counter-critique of 'third-ageism' has developed, expressed in the academic world by the development of an explicitly 'anti' anti-ageing approach (Vincent, 2009). Such critiques of the third age have tended to focus upon its location within a particular cohort or generation, the baby boomers, addressing two related issues, that of an assumed generational inequity and rampant consumerism (Higgs and Gilleard 2015b). While anti anti-ageing discourse and imagery is rarely present in the media that is directed toward older people as consumers, it is often found in academic journals as well as in some of the 'op-eds' in the broadsheet media and popular sociology books. Here, the boomers are seen not as individual pioneers of new later lifestyles but as the collective representatives of a selfish, reckless, 'me' generation (Cooper 2021; McInnes, 2016; Paxman, 2011). This negative projection has recently mutated into the meme 'OK boomer' which has been amplified by younger users of

social media to identify older cohorts as both selfish and socially dominant (Meisner, 2020) and Covid-19 as a 'boomer remover' (Lichtenstein 2021).

The fourth age, by contrast, is realised in discourses framed around older people as 'third person' persons, those irredeemably 'othered' by their age, who have failed to stay fit, fashionable, and functional. Realised neither by lifestyle nor through identity, the fourth age functions as an intransigent social imaginary – whose imagery grows more powerful as the aspirational cultures of the third age wax larger. In many ways it forms the antithesis of the third age, rendering later life "bound in a binary discourse as either decline or success" (Sandberg, 2013: 13). But unlike the practices and discourses enacted by the participant consumers of the third age, the fourth age is a discourse shaped by others; a discourse about others realised through the dividing practices of social welfare and the expressed anxieties that readily spill over into the media. In contrast to the third age, the fourth age represents not diversity but uniformity: a sad uniformity culminating in abject frailty (Higgs and Gilleard 2014). This contrast has already been evidenced in empirical research on the images of older people in the media where a number of different clusters defining potential third age participants have been observed, in contrast to the unitary portrayal of a fourth age construed only through frailty and vulnerability (Williams, Wadleigh & Ylänne, 2010).

The fourth age and apocalyptic demography

Discourses derived from demography and epidemiology perform an influential role in framing social and health policies; activating 'health promotion' strategies by implying or actively articulating the 'negative' social imaginary of the fourth age; and alerting the public to the dangers of ageing, at an individual and societal level (Higgs and Gilleard, 2015a; 2017). Unlike other 'folk devils' besetting modern societies, the threat represented by 'the old' does not stem from their capacity to be actively dangerous elements in society. Instead, it centres on

their unlimited neediness that threatens to overwhelm the nation state's limited capacity to handle these claims. Unsurprising then that the analogies and metaphors most often used in relation to this danger are those of ecological disaster with constant reference in the media to rising tides, 'agequakes' and 'silver' tsunamis (Calasanti 2020; Laureys, 2009; Robertson, 1997; Saharia, 2014; Zeilig, 2014). In the Covid-19 pandemic this framing was dominated by accounts of residents of nursing homes being abandoned to the full ravages of the virus (Sepulveda, Stall, and Sinha 2020). In the UK, the fear of the National Health Service being overwhelmed led to older hospital patients being discharged to nursing homes without being tested for the virus (British Medical Journal 2020). In Sweden, a focus on giving citizens personal responsibility for taking precautions rather than implementing a mandatory lockdown contributed to Covid-19 coming into facilities for older people through care workers mingling with the population at large (Orange 2020). In Spain, the spread of the pandemic was so fast that a number of nursing home residents were abandoned by their carers; later, they were found dead by army units sent out to discover what had happened to them (Minder and Peltier 2020). It is therefore something of a paradox that as this form of 'fourth ageism' (Higgs and Gilleard 2021) became more widely known 'the moral imperative to care' kicked in to a greater degree, so much so that some commentators have raised the criticism of 'caremongering' as being a form of compassionate ageism (Vervaecke and Meisner, 2020).

Demography and epidemiology have been combined to render 'apocalyptic' this ageing of already aged societies. The recent Covid-19 pandemic may seem to challenge some of the assumptions of the demographic and epidemiological transition, but the underlying notion remains, that disease has ceased to be deadly for children and the young, and now frames the backdrop for old age, for 'real' old age, for the fourth age. The discourses of apocalyptic demography assume that medical, health and social costs will increase to previously unexperienced, unsustainable levels (Amalberti, Nicklin, and Braithwaite 2016). The rise in

the age of the older population has certainly led to a concomitant increase in chronic disease; the incidence – as well as the prevalence – of multi-morbidity, however defined, rises steeply with age (Formiga et al., 2013; St Sauver et al., 2015). Whether this is an inevitable, intrinsic, and universal feature of living longer, can be challenged. One of the largest surveys of the oldest old conducted in mainland China, for example, observed that the prevalence of chronic disease in fact *declined* after age 80, with fewer nonagenarians and centenarians suffering from chronic diseases compared with their younger, octogenarian peers (Dupre, Liu and Gu, 2008).. What these and other related studies suggest is that living through 'the oldest ages' may not lead to progressively greater levels of disability and dependency. Such views, however, rarely feature in the mass media which remain dominated by a narrative of increasing ageing as a 'growing pandemic' (Martin, Williams and O'Neill 2009) or in the context of Covid-19, a threat to public health (Zhang and Liu 2021). Real old age – aka the fourth age - is invariably portrayed as disastrous both for individuals and for the wider society.

'Generation Reckless': Baby boomers as a social problem

An alternative rendering of later life can be seen in the media discourses surrounding the ageing of the post-war cohorts, the so-called 'baby-boomer' generation. An example of their representation and the formulation of the difficulties that they create has been provided by the UK political commentator and one time collaborator of Anthony Giddens, Will Hutton, who writes:

> The baby boomers. Born between 1945 and 1955, they are busy ignoring the biblical calculus that a man's span is three score years and 10. 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 – an object of resentment as much as admiration.
>
> Will Hutton, *Observer*, Sunday 22 August 2010

The designation baby boomer was initially used to describe the large twenty-year US birth cohort born between the mid-1940s and the early 1960s (Russell 1982; Light 1988). It has grown to cover all those reaching retirement age in the second and third decades of the 21st century (Dytchwald 1999). In part this reflects the powerful cultural and social effects that this generation has had as it moved through the life course. In previous work (Gilleard and Higgs 2005) we have pointed to the significance the 'generational schism' that occurred between these cohorts when they were young during the 'long' 1960s, and those members of the population who were already grown up and were growing older during this period. Writings of the time stressed the problems of this generational split and the conflict of value systems (Marwick 2001). In recent times this cohort has been seen again as problematic not so much for their size or rebelliousness, but for their expectations and influence. As Hutton alluded to above, they have become stereotyped as a particularly favoured group whose retirement would not only re-write the rules for old age, but would also bring about renewed generational conflict.

Outside of North America and the UK the demographic nature of the baby boomers has been less salient, mainly because different European nations have had different experiences of the post-Second World War period. In Finland, for example, the post war baby boom only lasted for about three years (Suokannas 2005; Karisto 2008); in Eastern Europe, the post-war period saw a decline in fertility which continued all through the 1950s (Therborn 1995: 37); the same was true in Italy (Livi Bacci 1967); while in Germany the post-war baby boom was a feature of the 1960s. In France, and in the UK, there were two quite separate booms, the first occurring between 1945 and 1950 and the second between 1960 and 1965 (Chauvel 2002;

Evandrou & Falkingham, 2000). Hence, it is only in the past few years that the ageing of the baby boomers has become a trope deployed in the media of European nations (Lundgren, and Ljuslinder 2011, in part the consequence of the internationalisation of US debates on generational equity and generational accounting, but also as a consequence of population ageing in parts of the European Union (Boersch-Supan, Heller and Reil-Held, 2011).

Intergenerational considerations consequently became influential in debates on welfare reform. Intergenerational inequalities were identified as a significant threat to the future of welfare; a threat flowing from the realisation that existing pension entitlements were seemingly providing financial security in retirement at the expense of other groups in society who were identified as having greater needs (Myles, 2002). This perceived threat has since become the source for media attacks on the members of post-war cohorts who are projected to be putting their interests and dispositions ahead of those of the rest of the population; particularly the young. It is in this context that the term 'baby boomers' has achieved a wider currency. Firstly, in the form of well-received books which lambasted the baby boom generation: their titles giving a fair impression of their general tone. *What Did the Baby Boomers Ever Do For Us?* (Beckett, 2010); *Jilted Generation: How Britain bankrupted its youth* (Howker and Malik, 2010); *The Pinch: How the baby boomers took their children's future - and why they should give it back* (Willetts, 2010); and *The Baby Boom: How It Got That Way (And It Wasn't My Fault) (And I'll Never Do It Again* (O'Rourke 2013)[ii].

In these works, as well as their accompanying amplification in the mass media, the moral stature, character, and upbringing of the baby boomers was critically questioned[iii]. There is often an explicit message that collectively these cohorts were taking more from society than they were prepared to give back. These baby boomers (whose generational identity is stressed more than their chronological age) have been projected as engaging in a form of moral

recklessness, destroying the inheritance that their own parents had worked so hard to bestow upon them (Beckett, 2010: xii). In the parlance of the 2020s these are the 'OK boomers', a term coined to reflect this combination of privilege and lack of concern for other generations (Meisner 2020).

Bristow (2015:86) has outlined some of the ways that the baby boomer generation has been constructed as a problem in the British media. The cultural script of the baby boomer problem, she argues, consists of five influential categories: the 'lucky' generation; the 'affluent' generation; the 'large' generation; the selfish generation; and the reckless generation. She draws particular attention to the portrayal of a 'reckless generation' who are seen to be focussed on the present to the detriment of longer-term issues. To the charge' that the baby boomers have 'dispossessed' younger generations and squandered their parents' legacy are added accusations that they have 'infantilised' society and subjected it to a valorisation of 'experimentation' as an end in itself. Infantilisation, Bristow contends, has meant that young people are now unable to achieve what were once seen as adult goals such as having a stable job or family life, or indeed owning their own home. As she points out such critical representation of the baby boomers 'expresses both a concern about the sixties assault on tradition, and a concern about the quest implied in that assault, for seeking out new knowledge and experimenting with the social order' (Bristow, 2015:104). Many of the 'virtues' associated with baby boomers are turned into 'vices'; ambition has become greed; affluence, wastefulness; being youthful, being infantile; being self-actualised, being self-obsessed; being leisure loving, being lazy; and being individualistic, being selfish (Bristow, 2015:106).

Many of these dispositions are evident in a series of interviews with UK baby boomers, conducted by Naomi Woodspring (Woodspring, 2016). These interviews illustrate both the desire to be different and the importance attached by boomers to enjoyment. One of the respondents put it like this: "You see, having fun is part of the picture as something that's on

the table, that's open to you because you're more open minded" (Woodspring, 2016:111). The baby boom cohorts are praised for their concern with fitness and health and simultaneously castigated for it (Mendes 2013; Timonen 2016). Part of the criticism is that in focusing on these new 'technologies of the self' an invidious distinction is made between those who are able to participate in these fields, and those who are excluded from being able to do so (Jones and Higgs 2010). In a study of UK baby boomers' sense of generational identity, Leach and colleagues (2013) found that while there was evidence for baby boomers' engagement with consumption as an end in itself, this was tempered with other, more ethical considerations.

> This notion of an ethic of consuming that is generationally specific is strong in the accounts of baby boomers' sense of themselves, yet it demonstrates a bridging between two different consumer ethics which address the passage of time in different ways. The 'make do and mend' and 'ageing' ethic, in which time is extended by making good and through carefully researched rational choices; and the speeding up of time or 'youthful' ethic through the adoption of credit, the need for novelty, and 'early adoption' of consumer goods.
>
> (Leach et al, 2013: 114)

As part of the 'critique' of baby boomerism, the cultural distinction sought by members of the baby boom cohorts is represented not as a sign of their 'successfully' resisting age but as the demonstration of their failure to accept the realities of decline and their common location as 'old people'. This theme has been picked up by those trying to engage with the more individualised spirituality associated with the post-sixties generational habitus. Theologians such as Elizabeth MacKinlay (2014), for example, advocate self-transcendence and transformation as important strategies to deal with extended lifespans and the limitations of old age. As she writes: "There are many things to learn about the process of ageing and how we might best approach this, and the big choices are either to join the anti-ageing lobby or to

embrace our ageing" (MacKinlay, 2014:). It is clear that MacKinlay favours the latter; one that prioritises forgiveness and gratitude as ways of moving to what she describes as 'other centredness'.

Covid-19 and the confounding discourses of later life

As we hope to have shown, the discourses connected to the third age differ substantially from those concerned with the fourth age imaginary. These have become particularly exposed in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, though they are seldom commented upon (Verbruggen, Howell and Simmons, 2020: 230). While the themes of *apocalyptic demography* and of the *reckless generation* are generally kept separate, sometimes they are brought together as alternate sides of the same coin – of age as a new emerging source of conflict and threat to the social order – criticised for its agedness on the one hand, and for its rejection of agedness on the other. In relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, however, the overarching image has been that of the fourth age – with deaths among frail nursing home residents accounting for almost half of all reported deaths in many countries (Thompson et al., 2020). This notion of age vulnerability is not just confined to Europe and North America. In their study of Covid-19 media coverage in China, Zhang and Liu (2021) a pointed out how the media in China have presented the whole of the older population as a homogenised passive and vulnerable group. One consequence has been that many older people, certainly in countries such as the UK, have protested against the over-generalised view of agedness introduced by the pandemic, as well as the government's use of chronology in targeting those expected to self[iv]isolate . Older people have written to the press both in support of and in opposition to this age targeting, some describing these policies as being inherently 'ageist', insisting instead that they are as fit and robust as many younger people while others have argued for the necessity of such 'benign' ageism. Many commentators (including gerontologists) have ignored the implicit 'othering'

that lies behind the 'young old' complaining about being categorised alongside those who are truly 'old'. It is clear that many of those most actively participating in the third age both recognise and resent the chronological corralling of later life back into a framework of need and dependency that many thought they had escaped.

Accepting that many of the 'oldest old' are vulnerable, while denying that old age has any inherent connection with disease or decline poses a dilemma both for older people themselves and for gerontology (Fletcher 2020). On the one hand, there is justifiable anger at the 'ageist' neglect shown toward residents and staff in long term care facilities; on the other hand, accusations of ageism are directed at the use of age as a criterion for mandatory 'shielding' – effectively restricting access to the everyday practices of shopping, visiting friends and family and the various pleasures of being among people to those judged not yet 'old'. The two US presidential candidates in the 2020 election, exemplified many of these contradictions in their use of the mass media. One, the arch-libertarian, projected his freedom to do as he liked, including not identifying as 'old and vulnerable', feeling at liberty to run the risk of infection; the other, more conservative, projected the need to display caution without at the same time drawing attention to his own age-related vulnerability. While both, in different ways demonstrated the kinds of power attached to the third age, it was their political power, not their age, which ensured this realisation of third age culture. For those with more limited assets and capitals, given the turn in circumstances as has been brought about by Covid-19, the social category of a homogenising agedness can quickly be brought back into play. At the same time, while the residents of the nursing homes remain invisible figures lost in the calculation of the costs to the nation of the pandemic, the two septuagenarian politicians competed in their claims to restore to health the sick body of the state.

Conclusions

Our intention in writing this chapter has been to draw attention to a dichotomy underlying media discourses of ageing in contemporary Western society. These discourses run in parallel as ways of situating the changes to old age that have emerged over the past 30 years. Discourses reflecting the cultures of the third age are imbricated in various forms of mass media through their connections to the generation habitus of the baby boom cohorts. Given the valorisation of agency and choice in these discourses, it is not surprising that the third age is thoroughly mediatised, as a cultural imaginary reflecting the various constructions of 'ageless ageing'. This is not without consequences as we have shown in the rise of the criticisms directed at both the imaginary and the 'OK boomers' themselves.

While the fourth age also operates as a discursive trope within the media, it is one put at a distance from everyday desires and experience. Its focus is on feared futures and an imaginary otherness that maintains its irreconcilable distance from any mediatised subjectivity. The fourth age is no place for desiring subjects. Some commentators argue that the principal difference between the third and fourth ages lies in the negative attributes that are given to the fourth age by society and the mass media. We would disagree with this assessment by pointing out that the two discourses are constituted by quite different processes; one being agentic and aspirational, while the other is ascribing and threatening. Trying to overwrite one discourse with the techniques of the other misses the point that ageing and old age are neither simply discursive nor performative.

Media accounts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the various nation states' responses to it might seem to have erased the distinction between the third age and the fourth, focusing so much on the common vulnerabilities of agedness and its equivalence with disease. At the same time, a resistance to such homogenisation has also been evident, if not so widely reported, both

by older people and by organisations representing older people. This, we suggest, testifies to the continuing struggle over the symbolic space that is later life. While the material differences supporting this symbolic distinction are matters of degree and dimensionality, the symbolic struggles evident in the media and in the mediatisation of later life tend toward a simplified binary contest, between those who are ‘really’ and those ‘not really’ old. The absoluteness of the former and the contingency of the latter will remain, long after Covid-19 has become a collective, if fractious memory.

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Notes

[i] Describing this as a contrast between two imaginaries is our preferred formulation, but it could equally be treated as a contrast between two dominant *frames* employed by the media. Our preference reflects our desire to extend the analysis to social contexts beyond media texts and imagery.

[ii] These books were reviewed and discussed across the media in numerous articles and op-ed pieces; so much so that they have produced their own complement of book length reposts such as Jane Bristow's *Stop Mugging Grandma* (Bristow 2019).

[iii] British broadsheet newspapers have been influential in developing this trope. See, for example, Madeleine Bunting 'Generational warriors have a point but go easy on the old' *The Guardian,* 22 August, 2010; Nick Cohen 'Let the children pay', *The Observer*, 19 August 2005; Robert Colvile 'The Boomers' bonanza has left precious little for the rest of us' *Daily Telegraph,* 1 September , 2010; Richard Edwards 'Baby boom generation have failed their children', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 January, 2010; Philip Inman 'Baby boomers must do their bit for Britain's economy' *The Guardian*, 5 January, 2011; Paul Vallely. Will the baby boomers bankrupt Britain? *The Independent* Monday, 5 April, 2010. This theme is continuing a decade later. See for instance Yvonne Roberts, 'Millennials are struggling. Is it the fault of the baby boomers?' *The Observer* 29 April 2018 and Alexis Self, 'Forget pensions - why Britain's millennials are preparing for social collapse' *Prospect* 28 March 2021.

[iv] A flavour of this protest is illustrated in a letter to *The Guardian*, 29 April, 2020. Its author, Hella Pick, wrote: "I live on my own. For me, the imposition of self-isolation for any length of time – in plain words, being caged in – would be tantamount to a living death. That is why I applaud and join the growing number of people who are protesting against moves to separate the over-70s from their families and fellow citizens, and why I hope that many more will make themselves heard, and if necessary join in seeking legal action to restrain the authorities". More recently a theatre group based in Cardiff, Wales, has put on a drama illustrating the same point – namely that "We don't want to portray ourselves as victims or as being vanquished" (Clare Horton, *The Guardian*, 15 December, 2020).