

**The ideology of ageism versus the social imaginary of the fourth age: Two differing approaches to the negative contexts of old age**

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## **Abstract**

The development of social gerontology has led to the emergence of its own terminology and conceptual armoury. 'Ageism' has been a key concept in articulating the mission of gerontology and was deliberately intended to act as an equivalent to the concepts of racism and sexism. As a term it has established itself as a lodestone for thinking about the de-valued and residualised social status of older people in contemporary society. Given this background ageism often used to describe an overarching ideology that operates in society to the detriment of older people and which in large part explains their economic, social and cultural marginality. This paper critiques this approach and suggests an alternative based upon the idea of the social imaginary of the fourth age. It argues that not only is the idea of ageism too totalising and contradictory but that it does not address key aspects of the corporeality of old age. Adopting the idea of a social imaginary offers a more nuanced approach to the tensions that are present in later life without reducing them to a single external cause or explanation.

## **Introduction**

The development of social gerontology has led to the emergence of its own terminology and conceptual armoury. Alongside terms such as ‘disengagement’, ‘structured dependency’ and ‘successful ageing’, ‘ageism’ has been a key tool in articulating the mission of gerontology. Introduced by Robert Butler in 1969, ageism was deliberately intended to act as an equivalent to the concepts of racism and sexism that were being articulated by the emerging social movements of the time (Palmore and Manton 1973). As a term, ageism has established itself as a lodestone for thinking about the social categorisation of older people and the reasons for their de-valued and residualised status in contemporary society. Many commentators have identified agedness as a source of discrimination, as when an often arbitrarily designated chronological age is used to treat older people as ‘figures of fun and ridicule’ (Neuberger, 2009: 106). Alongside what Butler considered the low value accorded to old age and the negative stereotyping of older people, he also identified the action of discriminatory institutional processes that further worsened the position of older people as a component part of ageism (Butler 1969). How ageism functions and what fundamentally underpins it has been a topic of extensive ongoing discussion within the field of social gerontology (Bytheway, 2005; Coupland and Coupland 1993; Greenberg, Schimel and Martens 2002; Snellman 2016).

Within these discussions, some have made a strong argument to the effect that ‘ageism’ can be seen as an overarching ideology that operates to the detriment of older people and which in large part explains their economic, social and cultural marginality in society (Bytheway 1994). Others such as Macnicol (2006; 2015) have been somewhat less categorical, seeing ageism as a multifaceted phenomenon which can lead to negative discrimination but which also justifies the existence of various age related benefits and mandatory retirement pensions.

Behind this latter position lies less of an interest in the processes of ageism than a concern to use the term as a legal weapon in challenging unfair discrimination faced by older people. Yet another group is mainly concerned with how negative stereotypes of old age can both stigmatise and discriminate against older people in ways that can be overcome if the issue is addressed by challenging these assumptions (Chiu et al. 2001; Levy 2001). However, in spite of the fact that there are many different articulations of what is meant by ageism, terms such as ageism, ageist discourse and ageist ideology are often used in combination and can become equivalent and interchangeable. Part of the reason for this lack of clarity in definitions and overlap in explanatory function is the desire to make ageism a source of oppression equal to other acknowledged oppressions - complete with its own history of contestation and struggle (Gullette 2017a; Ray et al 2009). For such a strategy to work effectively, the more that ageism can be identified as an ideology, the greater can be its general explanatory value. In this stronger formulation, ageism may emerge as a product of attitudes or prejudice, but can also be combined to become an aspect of an inherently discriminatory society or culture. Such structural discrimination thereby links disadvantageous employment practices and social policies to the oppressions of institutional abuse, the 'segregation' of old people and the negative stereotyping of old age. Margaret Gullette who has been very influential in setting an agenda on ageism through her book *Agewise* (2011) has gone so far in her more recent work as to identify ageism as 'trauma' threatening older people 'with palpable violence' (Gullette 2017a: 14). Consequently, while quite a few other writers might hesitate to engage with the totality of uses to which ageism as an ideology has been put, most would recognise that making such links between the individual and the societal facilitates social critique and political engagement.

In this paper we want not only to challenge the ubiquity of 'ageism' as a catch-all concept capable of explaining the discrimination faced by older people but we also want to advance the argument that the corporeality of the ageing body has been underplayed in the way agedness has been re-configured as 'ideological'. In a number of works we have posited a more culturally reflexive approach to contemporary ageing which we think affords more insight into the dialectic of age (Gadow, 1983) than a reliance on the idea of ageism as ideology (Gilleard and Higgs 2010; Higgs and Gilleard 2015). In particular, we argue that later life has become framed through two different but interconnected concepts, namely those of the third age and fourth age. This has produced a bifurcation between an aspirational and a feared later life which if put at the centre of analysis avoids some of the more obvious contradictions that have beset the 'ageism as ideology' approach, as noted for example by Longino (2005). Central to this reformulation is the separation of the socio-structural circumstances of later life from the cultural. This allows us to explain both the advances that have been made in terms of the improvement in the material circumstances of older people's lives, as well as the devaluation of agedness in contemporary culture. Shifting the focus from ageism as a generalising structure to one concentrating on the interplay between the cultures of a third age and the social imaginary of a fourth age does not obviate concerns about experiences of 'unequal ageing'. The impact of health inequalities and poverty at later ages still retains importance, but in this new perspective they can be studied as features of a more widely distributed set of social inequalities; ones that are realised at different times and in different ways across the whole of the life course (Gilleard and Higgs 2016).

Critiques of social processes employing ageism as a lens have generally incorporated simple age-based distributional inequalities to concerns regarding the civic exclusion and cultural devaluation of older persons. Indeed the EU Horizon 2020 programme has organised a

number of initiatives specifically on the topic of ageism including the 'EuroAgeism' international training network who identify as their prime concern the 'high prevalence of ageism; the complex and often negative construction of old age' in Europe ([https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/211870\\_en.html](https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/211870_en.html)). A similar EU initiative has been the 'COST action on Ageism' which also identifies the high prevalence of ageism and the 'unequivocal evidence concerning the negative consequences associated with ageism at the individual, familial, and societal levels' ([http://www.cost.eu/COST\\_Actions/isch/IS1402](http://www.cost.eu/COST_Actions/isch/IS1402)). These concerns have been extended to encompass an ever-wider range of phenomena, from restricted access to specific health resources to various forms of gendered age-based exclusion within contemporary culture and society.

Ageism has also become more and more focused on the body. One contributor to the book '*Unequal Ageing*' commented: "The fading body is derided, mocked in an attempt to distance the unacceptable truth of ageing" (Appleyard, 2009: 126). This shift toward the body has had the effect of re-orientating ageism research towards concerns over stereotypes and the internalisation of psycho-social processes and representations (Wilkinson and Ferraro 2002) with less concern as to how, as Pickard (2016) describes it, the 'age system' works. While many writers using the concept of ageism might not evince such a totalising view of the concept, it is also the case that they rarely criticise its use or its extension to wider aspects of the lives of older people. In her most recent book, '*Ending Ageism, or How Not to Shoot Old People*' (2017a), Gullette focuses on the way that the embodiment of ageing is not only subject to 'age shaming' but is itself a product of a 'decline ideology' (2017a:192) which calls for a political response, as articulated in her much publicised 'declaration of grievances' (2017a:205-6). While it might be regarded as unrepresentative to focus on the work of one author, we would argue that from a variety of positions a consensus has built up around the

idea that ageism constitutes an oppressive ideology pervading contemporary society. Even if this recognition is not fully elaborated or even rendered theoretically consistent, it has captured the imagination of many of those working in the field of social gerontology and ageing studies as well as those creating and promoting policies for an 'ageing society' . While there are undoubted variations in how aspects of ageism can be understood, we would argue that this cultural formulation of ageism is now considered as Kuhnian 'normal science' in gerontology (Kuhn 1970).

Our concern in this paper is to outline the limitations of the 'ageism ideology' argument. We argue that the social representations of later life can be better understood as outcomes of the interplay of the cultures of ageing, rather than the product of an all-embracing social dynamic. Our aim in challenging the idea of ageism as a coherent way of linking institutional and individual concerns around later life is not to deny that the term may still be useful in describing the 'surface level' of discriminatory or exclusionary attitudes and practices evident in contemporary society. It is undoubtedly true that older people can still suffer discrimination, have their interests ignored, and can be demeaned and scapegoated as well as subjected to ridicule. All of this, we agree, should be pointed out and challenged by gerontologists (Cann and Dean 2009). Our concern however is that this pragmatic use of ageism as prejudice has too easily given way to a more reified framework that risks becoming too totalising and thereby rendered less valuable for researchers exploring the impact of such attitudes and practices in the context of social gerontology and ageing studies.

### **Ageism and ideology**

It is not our intention to provide a review of all the literature on 'ageism'. This has been done in differing ways in a number of contributions, such as those by Erdman Palmore (1999), Bill

Bytheway (1994) Glenda Laws (1995) and Todd Nelson (2004). Rather, as stated earlier, we wish to outline the way in which accounts of ageism have come close to identifying it as a pervasive ideology saturating society (Walker 2012). While some authors might resist having their work classified as doing this, we would argue that the polysemous quality of Butler's term has created such an 'ideology effect'. With this in mind, we argue that the difficulties surrounding this 'strong' version of ageism have led the term to be overextended, to the detriment of a critical understanding of the complexities of later life.

### *Ageism*

As is well known Robert Butler not only coined the term ageism, he continued to be actively involved in discussions of it until the end of his life in 2010 (Achenbaum 2013). His 1969 paper outlined the discrimination that older Americans experienced in the post-war period in terms of housing and wealth as well as in the form of institutionalised mandatory retirement. It was also apparent in the low level of funding then allocated for research into the health problems of older people. Significantly, he also pointed to the cultural construction of older people as both excluded and 'other' to ordinary people, a process that he argued led to their further marginalisation (Butler 1969). In an editorial published in 2009 he wrote that it was important to recognise 'that age discrimination exists advertently and inadvertently in personal and institutional form, and that economic and psychological factors play a major part in ageism as well' (Butler 2009:211).

Bytheway (2005) has made the point that there are two 'not wholly compatible' approaches to defining ageism. One concerns the beliefs about the negative impact of biological ageing on people of all ages and relates to fear of such ageing that develops throughout the life



course. The other is that exemplified by Robert Butler, which is summarised in the following way:

Ageism is discrimination against older people on grounds of age. Just as women are disadvantaged and oppressed as a result of sexism, just as black people and other minorities are oppressed by racism, so older people suffer from discrimination as a result of ageism. (Bytheway, 2005:361)

Continuing this theme, Bytheway argues that ageism is 'rooted in the social *identity* of the individual, both a bureaucratically managed identity and an identity conveyed by the physical appearance of the body' (Bytheway, 2005: 362, *italics in original*). Paradoxically this identity is most focused on the revelation of chronological age in both institutional as well as private arenas. A decade earlier Glenda Laws (1995) had positioned ageism as an oppressive set of practices, but also saw the ageism surrounding the body as a 'surface of inscription' and concluded that 'ageism is an embodied form of oppression' (Laws, 1995: 114). While there may be a number of sites in which ageism is contested, such as in employment, in the household and within the state, taken together they 'provide a tapestry on which ageist practices are woven' (Laws, 1995: 114). Laws, taking her cue from feminist and post-modern thought, resisted adopting an 'essentialist' position and identifying a single cause of ageism, argued that 'it is important to begin at the sites at which ageism occurs and in which the aged body is created' (Laws, 1995: 118).

Why should age become a source of oppression? One argument has been because of the costs borne by the welfare state in terms of pensions, health care and social services (Oran 2017). Part of the argument concerning the 'structured dependency' of old age that was advanced by writers such as Peter Townsend (Townsend 1981) was based on this very argument, as well as drawing on the implications of the 'fiscal crisis of the state' in shaping the political

economy of ageing. This model has recently been updated to include the re-articulation of retirement under the politics of neo-liberalism (Macnicol, 2015). However, if retirement was once the 'tragedy' of 'forced exclusion' from work, extending working life and forcing up retirement age are now the marks of discrimination. Faced with this shift of gears, it is perhaps unsurprising that the research agenda investigating ageism has turned away from the structural position of age and work towards a concern for the social psychological and embodied aspects of ageing as the explanatory site for ageism.

Within this wider framework, some researchers identify ageism as a prejudice against our feared future selves (Nelson 2005). Palmore's book on ageism concentrated on techniques to overcome the prejudices about age that beset both the old and the young (Palmore 1999). North and Fiske have argued that ageism is a trans-national phenomenon whose roots are to be found in cohort competition for status and jobs, and manifested in negative assessments of physical markers of agedness, such as grey hair and wrinkles (North and Fiske, 2012; 2013). As noted earlier, a more strongly culturalist reading is provided by Margaret Gullette (2017a) who argues that ageist ideology is not only pervasive in all cultural forms and social encounters but that it is profoundly oppressive leading to both shame and trauma for older people based around the fear of old age. Decline ideologies are so pervasive in culture, she argues, that the term 'aging' itself should be dropped from the lexicon of terms used to describe old age and the term ageism should be used in its stead (Gullette 2017b). Ageism, like the oppressions of gender, sexuality and race is thought to be a source of personal grief and psychic damage and like sexism and racism also demands a politics of identity and redress. Lynne Segal (2014) amplifies this theme by arguing that ageism implies a dependency and a redundancy of older women who are seen as unable to create a positive experience of old age because of the dominant tropes of a gendered ageism.

While we share this concern for recognising the negative codes of ugliness and abjection through which the ageing body is viewed (Gilleard and Higgs, 2011b; Gilleard and Higgs, 2013), we do not see these negative stereotypes as created by ageist discourses. Instead, we contend that they reflect existential and ontological concerns about ageing and decline which pre-date any modernist or neo-liberal agenda. While such concerns are capable of being employed to promote particular agendas by both state and market actors – a *biopolitics* of ageing and a market for anti-ageing products and services – they are not constituted as such. This historical distinction goes to the root of the differences between accounts of ageism as ideology and those centring on the role of the social imaginary of the fourth age.

### *Ideology*

In treating ageism as ideology, even in a casual fashion, the status of what constitutes an ideology necessarily comes into play. Over the past half century, this question has received considerable attention particularly from Marxist writers (Eagleton 2014; Larrain 1979; Morris 2016; Rehmann 2013; Therborn 1999; Žižek 1994). Most point to its modernist and pejorative meaning as a way of accounting for dominant ideas that maintain political and social power. While the idea of ideology has acquired a rather more neutral meaning in recent years, it still retains its inference of hiding or masking reality and projecting untruths. For many decades an orthodoxy reigned which relied on a 'base –superstructure' model of the relationship between the economy and ideas about social relations. Over time, and under the influence of different intellectual currents, the concept began to be seen as a determining social structure of its own (Abercrombie 1980). Perceived as a relatively autonomous discourse it was, in Louis Althusser's famous caveat, 'only in the last instance' determined by the economy (Althusser 1977: 113). Promoting this prioritising of ideology as discourse led

to the decline of an overt Marxist approach, with many feeling they were better served by adopting a more Foucauldian approach to politics where power was more polyvalent in its dispersion of influence and ideas (Elliot 1986) or attempted to combine both Marx and Foucault (Bidet 2016).

In the absence of a coherent and accepted notion of ideology, it is interesting how the idea of ageism as a dominant ideology might work. Salter and Salter (2018) have talked about a hegemonic ideology of ageing in their work on the political challenges posed by the emergence of the third age as it relates to contemporary social policy. They explicitly see the issues surrounding 'active ageing' through the prism of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. However, this is an explicit utilisation of concepts from the Marxist canon rather than their use as a rhetorical device; a way of presenting a 'radical' critique that merely echoes the imagery of Marxist influenced thought without explaining in any analytical detail its connection to social structures. The desire for ageism to carry such a critical content may be one reason why others have adopted the term 'ageist discourse' instead of 'ageist ideology' (Coupland and Coupland 1993). Influenced by the 'cultural turn' brought on by post-structuralism, the ability to describe ageism as a dominant discourse allows for a focus on attitudes towards ageing as well as on the use of age discriminatory terminology (McVittie, McKinlay, and Widdicombe, 2003). It also permits ageist discourses to be generally viewed as negative in their consequences while overlooking or ignoring seemingly positive formulations such as 'ageing well' (Angus and Reeve 2006). Treating ageism as an ideological discourse also offers some opportunities for the production of counter-discourses such as are present in Coupland and Williams' accounts of the different discourses surrounding women's experience of the menopause (Coupland and Williams 2002). However, as Van Dijk's (1993) overview of 'critical discourse analysis' contends, it is important to

identify the oppressive and discriminatory factors operating within specific discourses which are 'promoted by elites and their discourses... and their discursive management of the public mind' (van Dijk 1993: 280). Without the identification of a causal mechanism it is difficult to establish precisely why such discourses exist in the first place let alone what maintains them.

### **Ageing and the social imaginary of the fourth age**

We have posited an alternative basis for understanding some of the issues usually subsumed under the mantle of ageism utilising the notion of a 'social imaginary' of the fourth age (Higgs and Gilleard 2016). This is understood as operating very differently from the cultural field[s] of the third age which can be understood as originating within the social changes of the late twentieth century and its consumerist economy where the focus on youthfulness and vitality leads to a corresponding distancing from the markers of old age (Higgs and Gilleard 2014). This might at first sight seem similar to the accounts provided by Gullette and Segal who also point to this aspect of ageism. They, however, provide little explanation of it other than seeing it as intrinsically connected to and intersecting with other forms of oppression. We would contend that the active 'othering' of old age in contemporary culture is more closely connected to the growth of consumer markets, lifestyle differentiation and the valorisation of choice, agency and self-expression, all of which are implicated in the cultures of the third age. The putative 'dark side' of old age represented antithetically as a fourth age, serves as an amplifier of those cultures, not their product (Gilleard and Higgs 2010; Higgs and Gilleard 2014). The fourth age is not therefore a residual category of the third age –later life deprived of its cultural or symbolic capital (Higgs and Gilleard 2014) but draws upon deeper traditions. The negative dimensions of old age and their capacity to serve as a *social imaginary*, a term adapted from the work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) have their origins in what he calls the socio-historical 'magma' of pre-modern society .

In addressing this imaginary and its connection to the concept of ageism, we believe that two points need to be made. The first is that many of the key *corporeal* processes of ageing are perceived as making the human body appear less attractive. The more individuals are subject to the processes of corporeal ageing, the more abject and unattractive their body becomes - what Lowenthal has termed the 'almost universal' aversion to 'the look of age' (Lowenthal, 1985: 129). While acknowledging that these processes are both gendered and racialised, and while accepting that not all bodies do become less attractive with age, and indeed that some people may acquire corporeal attributes with age that might make them more rather than less attractive, such cases do not in themselves furnish convincing evidence to disprove the more general argument. Ideas of attractiveness may vary across time and place, and while the salience of such ideas may be qualified by other considerations, any particular set of human referents is made especially problematic by considerations of their agedness. It is old age's ontological quality of decay and decline that cuts across any simple construction of an 'ideological' concept of ageism.

### **Truth, reality and the 'imaginary'**

Implicit in all uses of the term 'imaginary' is a contrast with what is not imaginary, what might be thought to be real. In the Marxist tradition, as we have seen, this distinction is structural: between the imaginary (ideological) representations of social relations and the actual lived relationships of power and exploitation. (Marx and Engels 1974). Others, such as Althusser have made the distinction between 'scientific' theoretical practice and the ideologically contaminated practices of everyday life (Althusser 1990). Rejecting any epistemological foundation for ideology, Althusser claimed that ideology is better formulated as a set of representations which are distinguished from science whose 'practico-social

function is more important than the theoretical function (function as knowledge)' (Althusser 1977: 231). This approach has been extensively criticised. Glucksmann (1972) famously argued that the effect of Althusser's formulation was to create a 'ventriloquist structuralism' where all the processes of society occur behind peoples' backs. Ted Benton also took Althusser to task for outdoing Talcott Parsons in relation to functionalism, claiming that if Parsons's actors are cultural dopes, Althusser's agents are 'structural dopes of an even more stunning mediocrity' (Benton, 1984: 222).

As already noted, the abandonment of a realist epistemological dimension to ideology has had profound effects on the utility of the concept of ideology (Morris 2016), opening the door to more discursive approaches influenced by Michel Foucault which operate with more fluid concepts of 'truth' (Anderson 1983). Within these alternative conceptions, based upon the interplay between various forms of power and knowledge there is not the same need for 'ideologies' to demonstrate some connection to an 'underlying reality' determining their shape and forms. The eclipse of the more traditional Marxist view of ideology in the present intellectual environment, as well as the difficulty of finding an adequate base for ageism to emerge as an ideology, provides possibilities for the exploration of imaginaries as a way of understanding what has been described as ageism. For writers such as Benedict Anderson (1988) and Charles Taylor (2004), the power of the social imaginary is realised through society as a necessary function. Once society expands beyond the directly knowable bounds of small, face-to-face interactions it becomes important to ensure common understandings, predictability of social relations and trust. There is a need for mechanisms to communicate and transmit shared understandings, not because of any attempt to hide the power of elites but simply to sustain the social within an ever-expanding commons – and the necessity of the social imaginary to bring in what cannot be brought in through the medium of everyday face-

to-face interaction. Within such spaces, of course, comes greater ambiguity and as societies and the institutions of community and communication grow more complex, the space but not the coherence of the imaginary expands.

### **Imagining and othering old age**

Within western culture, old age has been represented as another country, a 'foreign' country which remains 'other' to most members of society (Higgs and Gilleard 2014). Developing this theme it can be argued that the 'otherness' surrounding old age relates not just to its corporeal otherness, the physical differences between old and young bodies but also to the chronological otherness of old age, its distance 'in time' from the contemporary concerns of those who embody the now, the present. This idea was well expressed by the poet May Sarton when she wrote: 'The trouble is, old age is not interesting until one gets there, a foreign country with an unknown language to the young and even to the middle-aged' (*As We Are Now* 1982:23). A similar sentiment regarding the distance between old age and youth was expressed in the opening lines of L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* (1961). He wrote: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there' (Hartley 1961: 1). While the former stresses the otherness of being old, the latter emphasises the otherness of agedness itself, the strangeness of old age mixed with the old as strangers. These quotes can illustrate one of the key features of the imaginary, its separation from day-to-day, face-to-face experience – in short, its otherness. A number of other authors have also explored the historical roots of this trope as applied to old age (Lowenthal, 1985; Minois, 1989; Thane 2005). While still others have applied insights from post-colonial perspectives to better theorise the various 'othernesses' operative in social representations of old age as well as problematising the unitary representation of old age often present in critical gerontology (van



Dyk, 2016). What such approaches make clear is that old age is represented more often as an attribute of others than a conscious identity of self<sup>i</sup>.

As has been widely acknowledged, in the context of the transformation of later life and the creation of possible post-working life lifestyles there has been a focus on 'ageless ageing' drawing away from the association of chronological age with infirmity and decline (Andrews 1999; Dychtwald 2005). This has had the consequence of throwing into sharp relief a newly residualised old age, framed as 'real' old age, and which forms part of the social imaginary of the fourth age. Unlike the putative product of ageism this imaginary is less a category or status as a state of being, framed by frailty, social care, abjection and the indignities of old age (Gilleard and Higgs 2010; Higgs and Gilleard 2016). In Sarton's terms, 'real' old age is something that one falls into, rather than simply another region of life one is travelling through (Sarton 1996: 15). This discursive 'othering' plays a key role in situating the social imaginary of the fourth age, drawing upon already existing shared assumptions about the nature of 'real' old age and serving to amplify its fears. It may be that these assumptions share the 'decline ideology' as articulated by Gullette and her desire to remove ageing from the gerontological lexicon (Gullette 2017b) but to see the corporeality of old age as little more than the imagined product of culture implies a degree of social constructionism that most people would find difficult to accept.

The interconnectedness of ageing, vulnerability and frailty is fundamental to the process of othering old age. Frailty has become one of the boundary issues articulating the fourth age imaginary (Higgs and Gilleard, 2015). Not only have these issues become central to a 'densified' old age, but as Degnen (2007) points out the experiences of corporeality and morbidity that demarcates an 'us' from a 'them' serve as 'the truth' of this distinction, more

so than does the representation of chronological age. Within the discourses of bio-medicine, as well as those of health and social care, frailty functions as a way of alerting concerned institutions to the collapse of agency and the demise of the autonomous identity of the older individual (Gilleard and Higgs 2010; Tomkow 2018). When dementia is added a further deepening of the social imaginary occurs which some researchers have described as the 'social death' of the subject (Sweeting and Gilhooly, 1997). In addition to the dependency implied by frailty, the additional cognitive impairments constituting the various dementias strip the individual of the forms of agency and identity expressed by choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure while social responses to the condition amplify this 'ageing without agency' replacing first person narratives with those of the third person (Higgs and Gilleard 2017). Developing this approach further, it can be argued that such 'othering' of old age is not the same as the ideological othering of an abject class, nor is it the exercise of a ruling classes' dispossession of its dominated inferiors such as Georges Bataille contended in his original formulation of abjection and the abject classes (Bataille, 1999). Rather, it is the othering of a totalising risk, as severe as it is ill-specified, that leaves no fixed position from which to offer opposition (or indeed to frame effective counter-imaginaries) – in effect to posit an opposing collective reality. If, as Iser has suggested, the imaginary is realised always and only as a 'relation' or 'oscillation' between a set of triggers and their activation (Iser, 1993: 223), the suppression of any imaginary cannot be simply willed, nor can an alternative imaginary be 'induced' without denying or ignoring the salience of agedness. This has the effect of realising precisely what the cultures of the third age want to achieve.

### **Ideology or social imaginary: A concluding comment**

This paper's principal argument is that the changes that have transformed later life and which have crystallised in the 21st century need to be recognised in the conceptual tools that

gerontologists use. In particular, the idea of ageism as an ideology which discriminates and oppresses is one that, while providing a radical gloss to arguments for social change, does not adequately address the much more nuanced issues that are now involved in ageing and old age. Resolving the Janus-faced predicament of wanting to live long yet not wanting to grow old cannot simply be reduced to combatting the operation of a discriminatory ideology or discourse - nor even attacking popular prejudices common in different circumstances.

Taking the arguments of the fourth age further we would contend that the imaginary is not willed into existence, nor can it be willed out of existence; it has features that relate to the existential dimensions of human corporeality and its physical limitations. Instead, we argue that it is better to acknowledge and explore the contexts and contradictions presented by ageing. These contradictions exist both at an individual and at a socio-cultural level.

Attempts to trace out their effects as well as to identify where their triggers can most readily be militated are not to be abandoned. Ageism as a concept can still have its uses, pointing out examples of discrimination or exclusion in cultural participation; in the delivery of health; in employment practices; as well as in the delivery of goods and services. This aspect of ageism may be active in restricting the opportunities for individuals as they age and come close to retirement, but it also has to be accepted that retirement itself (and the provision of pensions) is in fact a positive form of ageism dependent upon attributes of old age. How the different aspects of ageism are balanced in such circumstances is always going to be conditional and likely to be unresponsive to global judgements of categorical completeness.

The idea of an overarching ideology of ageism has much less purchase as an analysis, or as the focus of critique, let alone as a framework that can direct or sustain the social sciences and social policy. Holding on to it as *a key concept* orienting policy or theory will not help us understand the challenges posed by contemporary later life, nor can it serve to underpin local

or global policy initiatives designed to address the societal implications of the ageing of society. Not that we would suggest that the concept of a fourth age social imaginary will serve instead to fulfil this expansive role. Our point is that this latter term makes more analytical sense of the dilemmas facing society. By acknowledging the multiplicity of meanings that ‘old age’ necessarily presents, across the spaces where the state, markets and culture operate, we are both better able to explore its inherent ambiguity as well as to explore the limitations that criss-cross contemporary later life.

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### Footnote

<sup>i</sup> The relative absence of age as a source of social identity has been demonstrated by Hyde and Jones (2015: Figure 5.2, p.83).