

Amanda Grenier, Chris Phillipson and Richard Settersten eds.

*Precarity and Ageing: Understanding Insecurity and Risk in Later Life*. Policy Press, 2020. pp258

The negative position occupied by older people in modern societies has been a staple topic for researchers in social gerontology for many decades. Paradoxically this concern has often been absent from conventional sociological accounts of social divisions and inequalities with old age being regarded as a residual category outside of more salient social structures. In recent years, the circumstances of the older population has generated considerably more interest. Part of this interest has been a result of the greater economic diversity that older people represent as well as the blurring of the demarcations once associated with age. Tropes of intergenerational conflict as well as criticism of the now ageing baby boomer cohorts have become commonplace. The different experiences of those experiencing the 'new ageing' have led to new accounts explaining both the transformation of age and the nature of new forms of inequality in later life. Cultural gerontology has shifted the focus from terms such as 'structured dependency' to ideas such as the 'third age'. Engagement with the various forms of lifestyle and consumer culture have become as much a concern of research as are the levels of overall poverty among this section of the population. In response, and concerned that the issues of inequality in later life are being underplayed, this collection edited by key figures in critical gerontology makes the concept of precarity the centrepiece of a new approach to comprehending the complexities of later life and in so doing adding an edge to thinking about the subject.

In their introduction to the book, the editors provide an overview of why the term precarity makes much sense in understanding contemporary later life given its focus on both risk and insecurity and why these lead in turn to a more unequal old age. They see that as welfare states have undergone a 'neo-liberal' transformation there has been a weakening of the key institutions 'undergirding old age' especially pensions and health as well as social services. Consequently, as ageing has changed in relation to both longevity and cultural expectation it has become more precarious and contingent in nature. This instability has radically transformed the more structured and embedded situation that old age had occupied during most of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Old age alongside many other social locations had become precarious.

In using the term precarity, the editors are fully aware that there are three slightly different uses of the term in contemporary social science. These range from referring to particular life worlds characterised by uncertainty and insecurity; as a condition or a class (Standing's well known precariat); or as a politically induced ontological condition of vulnerability (as seen in the work of Judith Butler). In the chapters that follow these introductory remarks such distinctions may become blurred and occasionally used interchangeably but the general tone regarding the role of the term is consistent. There is a general commitment to the utility of the term as an explanatory device. Settersten's chapter on life course dynamics as causes of precarity in later life combines an account of how ageing and life transitions are key moments of precarity with a reflection on how subjective dispositions may play a role in deepening the anticipatory anxiety created by precarious social relations. These anxieties are seen as a product of neo-liberal emphases on choice and responsibility

that articulate expectations of reflexivity and self-efficacy among the population in ways that exacerbate inequalities. Stephen Katz in his chapter on the life course focuses more exclusively on Butler's tying together of precarity and vulnerability at many points across the life course but also wants to go further and point to the possibilities of resistance to precarity. He argues that it is necessary to go beyond the idea of resilience as this is part of the same discourse as precariousness and not a solution to it. In its stead, he wishes to recognise and democratise precarity in ways that gives value to all life. Michael Fine in his contribution on social care extends the discussion by examining the nature of dependency. In particular, he addresses how critical care theory might be enriched to create 'a global ethic of long term care' by focusing on the imbalances of power that lie at the heart of a precarity analysis.

Other chapters further apply the general concept of precarity to topics such as frailty (Grenier), older workers (Lain et al.), migration (Kobayashi and Khan), and how to research precarity itself (Portacolone). Using a precarity framework these contributions each address what is precarious about contemporary later life and provide fresh insights for debates that have gone on within gerontology. They jointly make the case for understanding contemporary ageing as a confluence of intersecting processes; some long established and some more proximal all occurring in circumstances that are often novel and more conditional.

A theme of resistance to precarity also runs throughout the book and establishes itself as a *motif* for what is perceived to be a reinvigorated critical gerontology. Certainly, Chris Phillipson in his chapter on austerity makes this very clear discussing both collective and individual responses to new forms of vulnerability. How this resistance is to be enacted is left relatively unformulated, but the importance of identifying the problem is not. This theme of resistance is very much evident in other chapters. Polivka and Luo present a general analysis of what they call the 'consolidation state' that links changes in the organisation of health care in the USA to neo-liberal policies projecting corporate interests over those of older people. The result, particularly in sectors such as long term care, has led to a growing sense of precariousness for older Americans as services are increasingly privatised and the financial effects of austerity create 'a glide path towards the extension of precarious employment into a precarious retirement'. In a concluding chapter, the editors make their claim for the importance of precarity as a way of addressing these changes which would help critical gerontology overcome some of the 'fragmentation of critical perspectives over the period since the 1980s' that they feel has blunted the effectiveness of their approach. This book certainly has the merit of creating a conceptual response to the difficulties that critical gerontology has found itself in over past decades. It is to be commended for a creative use of strands of thinking about precarity and how these can be applied to ageing and later life. It will certainly be of considerable use to researchers and scholars trying to make sense of the changed world in which ageing occurs. The approach which the book wishes to promote certainly starts a discussion, but to my mind, banking on one key concept may be as limiting as are other approaches relying on a specific theoretical construct such as 'structured dependency' or 'disengagement'. A desire to tie the contradictory experiences of 21<sup>st</sup> century old age to a critique of neo-liberalism may also be somewhat constraining and ultimately over-generalising. However, this book sets up a valuable framework and it is now for other approaches to rise to the challenge of these ideas.

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