

The uncanniness of ageing¹

Abstract

*The study of ageing and old age is not a topic that is commonly pursued in psychological and social studies. The general disparagement of the aged seems also to have affected the academy. However, the appearance of Lynne Segal's **Out of time: The pleasures and perils of ageing** in 2013, is in part an attempt to contribute to serious scholarship in the neglected area of "Age studies". Her text is simultaneously a memoir of a life-long feminist activist and intellectual, as well as a meticulous study of ageing. This review article highlights some of the many issues raised by Segal in the lives of old people: the persistently negative views towards old people; the conflict between the generations; the waning of desire in the aged; the uncanniness of ageing, and death; and the importance of relationships, and living actively and imaginatively in old age.*

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"I am old and I feel and look old", is how Jane Miller (2010: 2) starts her book on ageing which she wrote at the age of 78. She then follows this bold assertion by adding, "I like being old at least as much as I liked being middle-aged and a good deal more than I liked being young." (ibid) This is not the usual view that people have of ageing, or being old. The prejudice is that none of us want to age, and certainly no one wants to be old, except for the very young. The disdain towards ageing, and the old, is at one level rather odd given that we don't have a choice in the matter! And yet at another level many cultures are invested in elaborate forms of denial regarding the vicissitudes of old age, not to mention the unspoken fear of death (cf de Beauvoir, 1972). The usual associations with ageing and being old are not positive ones, and tend to conjure up images of vulnerability, fragility, dependence, failing health, and impaired mental functioning. The stereotypically positive images of ageing, and being old, are to do with (accumulated) wisdom, a certain satisfaction of a life lived well, and the restful quietude of retirement. This is

¹ A review article of Lynne Segal (2013) **Out of time: The pleasures and perils of ageing**. London: Verso. A paperback edition came out in 2014.

often accompanied with a view of old people as quietly and benignly “waiting to die” now that they have had their turn at life and living.

However, the positive and negative realities of old age only tell half the story of ageing, and both are unrealistic exaggerations of what it means to grow old. The reality is a much more complex and uneven picture incorporating both negative and positive aspects that vary over time. And it seems that many recent texts, whether memoirs (cf Miller, 2010; Segal, 2013), or accounts of how to “age well” (cf Karpf, 2014), struggle to capture the antinomies of ageing well, *and* ageing badly. Both Jane Miller and Lynne Segal, against their own best wishes, tend to focus on the positive aspects of growing old. This is also reflected in Randall’s (2013) article where he distinguishes between *getting* old which according to him has negative connotations of passivity and a lack of creativity, and *growing* old which implies positivity towards the narratives of our ageing futures. Unless one has a bleak outlook like the novelist Cormac McCarthy, it is not difficult to see why memoirs reflecting on old age would tend to avoid the negativity of ageing! There is something uncanny about self-consciously thinking about being old, and that “soon” we shall die, not to mention the perversity of dwelling on our declining health and mental faculties. The avoidance of the problems of old age can’t just be read as the denial of the (negative) realities of ageing, but have more to do with making a case for *living well* as we age, or as Anne Karpf (2014: 24, 25) says, “ageing creatively”, “ageing zestfully”.

Segal is not unaware of the many problems that we face as we age, and that these problems are compounded by issues of age, gender, and class position. Early on in her memoir, appropriately subtitled, “the pleasures and *perils* of ageing” (emphasis added), she refers to de Beauvoir’s (1972) seminal text on old age, and notes that “what was critical about Beauvoir’s writing was her repeated insistence that ‘old age’ is an Other which lives within everyone, whatever our age. Short of premature death, no one can escape it, no matter how much we may try to distance ourselves from it.” (Segal, 2013: 10). A myriad of “ills” is captured in the Other-ness of our old age: a fear of dying; a concern about failing health; a body that slowly and persistently lets us down; a loss of desire for life; the potential loneliness of a solitary old age; and much else. While Segal does not avoid these and other “perils” of ageing, her interest is to chart another course, and that is “to think imaginatively about ageing” (p 2), and not to focus “so much [on] the ageing body, and how to keep it spruce”, but rather to concern herself with “the complexities of mental life within ageing bodies” (p 18). As with Jane Miller, Segal wants our old age to be seen as an interesting time and life of *the mind*.

However, it is often said that age is just a number, as though it doesn’t matter how old we are, or the other equally platitudinous comment that you are as old as you feel. Our age, our number, does matter, and it has a *material* existence that no matter how hard we try to focus on the life of our (ageing) minds asserts itself with increasing persistence in the life of our ageing *bodies*. So let’s get the numbers out of the way: de Beauvoir was 62 when **La Vieillesse** (1970) was published [sometimes translated with the less brutal title of **The coming of age**, and sometimes merely, bluntly, as **Old age**]; Jane Miller was 78 when **Crazy age** (2010) was published; and Lynne Segal, who wrote **Out of time** during her late sixties, was 69 when it was published in 2013. But the numbers can’t be got out of the way as it is simultaneously revealing and obvious that hardly any *young* people are writing books about being old, with the odd exception of some novelists. The uncanniness of ageing, it seems to me, doesn’t register in our forties. So when is old? As odd as this may seem, this is not an easy question to answer, and is wound up in a politics of refusal of what it means to be called old. With more and more people living healthily into old age it is not surprising

that the exact designation of “old age” is becoming fluid, if not actively contested. Randall (2013: 166) “unhelpfully” proposes that “old age itself, whenever it begins (60,70, 80), be thought of as the postmodern phase of our lives as individuals ...”. There are also quite significant cultural variations with regard to what age is concerned old.

Being old is not something people are neutral about, neither the young, nor the old themselves. Oldness evokes many thoughts and feelings, and this is marvellously expressed in Segal’s opening sentence: “How old am I? Don’t ask, don’t tell. The question frightens me.” (p 1). I suppose part of what is frightening is facing “up to the fearful disparagement of old age” (p 1),² and again there are vast cultural differences in the social denigration of old people. Social attitudes towards the old, whether negative or benignly patronising, reverberate with our personal fears of ageing. Regardless of whether we are physically healthy and have a positive outlook we are also aware that we are ageing, and are not quite sure what our increasingly shortening future holds for us. The uncanny part of acknowledging that we are ageing seems to be contained in a sense of our *selves* as relatively stable over the course of our lives, and yet being aware that we have changed, and are continuing to change. In this regard Lynne Segal quotes the developmental biologist, Lewis Wolpert asking: “How can a seventeen-year-old, like me, suddenly be eighty-one?” (p 5). And time seems to play tricks with our sense of our selves, and knowing how to identify with being our age! “Act your age” would be an ironic injunction to an old person.

This notion of a stable and yet shifting sense of self is recognised by Anne Karpf (2014: 3) when she writes: “What’s more, on one thing all leading researchers concur: that we become more, and not less, diverse as we age. Age doesn’t obliterate our individual traits and identities – on the contrary, it heightens them.” There are complex psychological issues involved here in terms of how we “hold” images of our selves over time, of how we make sense of who looks back at us in the mirror, and of how we think people see us, if they see us at all. Sadly, it seems, in many instances, the old become invisible.

However, a much more interesting take is not how we are seen and not seen by others, but how we see ourselves, or more accurately, how we attempt to integrate the shifting narratives of who we were, and are, at different times of our lives. In a section called “Shifting voices”, from her first chapter (“How old am I?”), Segal outlines some of the processes of how we might think about our selves over time, as we go in search of our past/s, and the residues of the memories of the past that inhabit our present. Segal writes: “Moglen [a Californian literary theorist] herself manages to come to terms with ageing as she reflects that in old age we have access to many different subjectivities, or self-states, through all of the possible re-visitations of our younger selves. However, I wonder quite how conscious or comprehensible our ability to reclaim those former selves might be. We are not really in charge of the process: we are no longer those people we once were, there is real loss and usually something for us to mourn; and yet, when contexts allow it, the residues of those former selves may not only be expressed, but can sometimes be seen and affirmed by others. In our minds, the whole history of our attachments, the shifting sense we have of ourselves over a lifetime, accompanies the external losses of ageing. The past returns, never exactly as it was, but also never truly lost.” (p 28)

These fine-grained psychological reflections of ageing are continuously interwoven with a *politics* of ageing. Unsurprisingly, given Lynne Segal’s life-long commitment to feminist and egalitarian ideals, both in her activism and intellectual work, she states an explicit political agenda for her

² I must declare a self-interest, I am 63.

book: "... in this book I plan to skim lightly over both the many depredations of the flesh as well as its potential renewals, to look more closely at the psychology and politics of ageing. I am primarily concerned with the possibilities for and impediments to staying alive to life itself, whatever our age." (pp 3-4). The first thing to note is that there *is* a prejudice against oldness, and hence the aged, and very little is done about this politically. Secondly, ageism, even amongst the left, is not seen as worthy a political issue as sexism, racism, and classism. And yet, as Miller (2010), Karpf (2014), and Segal (2013) all point out, the intersection of age with gender (old women), race (old black people), and class (old poor people), exacerbates the lived-experience of these social groups. The reality is that if you are old, poor, black, and a woman, and live in a capitalist society, you are not going have a comfortable old age, and the chances are your constrained material circumstances will make for quite a miserable old age.

The consequences of living under capitalist austerity for poor old people are made all too clear in Segal's second chapter entitled "Generational warfare". Much of this chapter is focused around the public denunciations (TV, print media, debates) of the post-war generation of "baby boomers". They are accused, by both journalists and politicians, of being a drain on the state's resources (pensions, and health care for instance), of being slackers and lazy, and having "stolen" the future from a younger generation now entering adulthood. It is worth quoting some of these egregious attempts at a socio-economic analysis of the current crisis in Britain from the apologists of neo-liberalism. Firstly, there is "the life-long Labour supporter and journalist" (p 50), Francis Beckett, who writes that "While the philosophy of the sixties seemed progressive at the time, the Baby Boomers we remember are not the political reformers, but the millionaires"³ (in Segal, 2013: 51). The title of Beckett's book is revealing: **What did the baby boomers ever do for us? How the children of the sixties lived the dream and failed the future** (2010). The second quote is from **The Times** (London) chief economics columnist, Anatole Kaletsky, who in 2010, wrote: "The *greedy* demographic governing body of timid baby-boomers, *far more than the fervour of the bankers*, is the loyal mercantile calamity right away confronting Britain" (in Segal, 2013: 47; emphases added). So now you know, it is the generation of baby-boomers, people in their late sixties and early seventies, who are responsible for the economic crisis facing Britain, and not venal politicians, greedy bankers, and the insatiable need for accumulation of the 1%.

Psychoanalysis has a name for this attack on the generation of the baby boomers, and it is called, displacement. The crisis of a morally and financially bankrupt capitalist system is laid at the feet of a generation of old people, and the financial speculators and the avaricious and anti-social capitalist class get off scot-free. Clearly there is an issue of social provision (pensions, health care, housing), as the ageing population of many western countries grows as a result of people living longer. Social provision (social welfare) was one of the hallmarks of the post war social democratic and socialist Labour government(s) in Britain. The collapse of the social welfare state can't be attributed to the needs of social provision of poor old people, nor to the greed of the ageing baby boomer "millionaires" who presumably did pay taxes while they were making their so-called millions! Thatcherism, and a succession of pro-capitalist Labour governments, are the true architects of the crisis facing social welfare provision in Britain. While in South Africa the concerns of the burden on the fiscus of social grants is not (yet) couched in ageist terms, there is an increasingly hostile critique of the size of the population that is dependent on state assistance. So the contradictions of capitalist South Africa, with its enormous unemployment problem (estimates vary from 25% to 50%), are likely to manifest in increasing contestations as the state struggles to fulfil its commitment

³ Clearly he doesn't remember Tony Blair!

of social provision in the form of social grants to pensioners, the unemployed, the disabled, and child-headed households on the one hand, and making the country attractive to capitalist interests on the other hand. While the youth in South Africa, and in Britain and Europe, are legitimately angry about the bleak prospects that they face, these aren't inherently "generational conflicts" and are not solved by inappropriately targeting social groups, whether the groups constitute the aged (as in Britain), or foreigners (as in South Africa). Blaming the aged (baby boomers), or foreigners, is a displacement, and a distraction from the political work that needs to be done to begin to solve some of the intractable social and economic problems of our time. As Segal poignantly notes: "Understanding the present crisis is a task that both younger and older generations would do well to embark upon together. It is the growing inequality *within*, not *between*, the different age cohorts that underpins the current economic and social crisis ..." (p 58). On this score, and picking two events at random, it has been heartening to see the generational spread, albeit that young people were in the majority, in many of the Occupy movement crowds, as well as amongst the supporters of the left Greek party, SYRIZA.

The point is not about some odd "mixing of the generations", but rather that when there are common goals being pursued the age of the participants is going to be the least interesting feature to notice. It is also true that old people who keep involved in activities, projects, and social causes, that include young people or not, experience less isolation and feel affirmed by still engaging in a active life. However, "hanging out" with young people does seem to be good for us as we age, and not for reasons of nostalgia and voyeurism of the type of "when I was young"! As Segal notes: "Like Beauvoir, Athill [Diana Athill – called the "current British doyenne of old age", by Segal] also writes of the importance of staying in touch with younger people, so as not to slide into 'a general pessimism about life'" (p 128). Associations with young(er) people, whether as friends, colleagues, or comrades can be invigorating as forms of sociality that sustain the desire for life. The trick of course is to remember that it is the young that have youth on their side, not us, and we will do well to remember a slogan that appeared on Sunset Boulevard in 1950: "There's nothing tragic about being 50. Not unless you're trying to be 25" (quoted by Anne Karpf, 2014: 27).

Some of the most tragic aspects of being old relate to sexuality, and especially the pathetic attempts by old people, mostly old men, to "reclaim" their youth by pursuing a sexual interest with people much younger than themselves! Woody Allen's film, **You will meet a tall dark stranger** (2010), rather evocatively portrayed the pathos of ageing sexuality, as the lead character, played by Anthony Hopkins, divorces his wife of nearly 40 years, and eventually marries a young voluptuous twenty-something sex worker! It seems that older men's sexual interest in young women is a way of affirming that their age hasn't really affected them as they can still "perform" with a young woman, usually with the help of Viagra, and so therefore they must (still) be young. The conflation of sex with desire seems the tragic aspects of ageing (men's) sexuality as well as a form of denial. Karpf (2014:108) suggests something much more optimistic when she writes, "if we were more able to have a less sneering and jeering debate about older men and sex, more of them might savour their gentler and slower sexuality, and even discover that their partners find it more erotic". Clearly, Karpf has more faith in the recuperative possibilities of the (ageing) male ego than I do!

However, whether we are sneering and jeering or not about the sexuality of old people, there do seem to be some very entrenched taboos about old people, sex, and desire. Diski (2014) notes, in her review of Segal's **Out of time**, that "cultural taboos express universal disgust for geriatric sexuality". Segal devotes a chapter (Chapter 3: "The perils of desire") to a fascinating account of the perils, but also of the surprises of desire still present in many old people, and of the quietude

of desire, much diminished, without seemingly lost. While desire is most often associated with sexuality, it need not be restricted in this way. For instance, Miller (2010) talks about the many things that she stop wanting as she got older, like new clothes, and only one of them was sex. Miller (2010: 27-28) describes her feelings about her waning interest in sex by remarking “that the main thing I don’t want any more is sex. This is a relief, and also a surprise. And I wonder whether desire for things and people, covetousness, longings, are all aspects of narcissism, or rather, whether they are all feelings related in some way to pleasure in one’s self. If I had known when I was young that a time would come when I would get no pleasure from inhabiting my body or looking at it, and no excitement at the thought that it might be admired and even desired by someone else, especially if delectably adorned – or entirely unadorned – I suspect I would have thought it not all that worthwhile continuing to live.” While the waning interest in sex, and other forms of sensual desire, are well known and well documented as a feature of old people’s lives, the dialectics of (ageing) desire is not at all well understood. Part of the reason for this lack of understanding has to do with the taboos associated with talking about and investigating sexuality and desire in old people. So old people may be having sex, occasionally, often, but it is just not something you talk about.

The diminishing desire, of a sexual kind at least, can’t be explained by recourse to a physiological, and hence hormonal, account of old people’s bodies. It seems that the mysteries, and possible answers, regarding ageing desire, have more to do with psychological and psycho-social “attitudes” to our bodies and the bodies of other old people. And yet, many old people’s lack of desire of a sensual and sexual nature, is in contrast to their desire for companionship, close friendships, for a lively social life, and a continuing interest in intellectual pursuits. A desire then for life, in old age, can co-exist without a desire for sexuality. Is this just how it is as we age, or is this repression? Segal hints at repression when she writes: “Pronouncements of cheerful sexual abstinence [in the aged] look much less compelling for anyone used to delving more deeply into the curious and bizarre world encompassing sexuality and desire. Here, sex is never best seen as any one thing, or singular event.” (p 95). And again, “The situations that trigger desire are diverse and unpredictable, with or without any hope for or interest in direct physical contact. Seen in this way, rather than simply reduced to a version of genital interaction, it would never be straightforward to declare sex ‘safely’ over ... except perhaps when pain or morbidity rule the body entirely, obliterating every other sensation.” (p 96) The repression seems both of a personal or intrapsychic kind, as well as social repression. Segal goes against the grain of the social taboos surrounding geriatric sexuality, and the received view of “cheerful sexual abstinence”, in her reading and presentation of many, and mainly women’s, memoirs, novels, and other writings in which an active and joyful interest in sex and sensuality is evident. Segal is not making a counter argument against the reality of diminished interest in sex and bodily desire in old people, as Jenny Diski (2014) seems to suggest in her slightly irritable review, but rather wanting to show that the picture of sexuality and desire is much more complex and variable in the lives and experiences of the aged.

To conclude this discussion about desire it is worth noting a plain fact of many old people’s lives, and that is that desire might be diminished for the very simple reason that the person is single, lives on their own, or has lost their partner. As Segal herself notes: “it seems to me that the nub of one of the most contentious issues around ageing for women is the space that exists for love, intimacy and passion. It is certainly a topic that is often on my mind, although both personal experience and opinion surveys make it clear that older women express varying degrees of interest in the subject, relating especially to whether or not they are comfortably partnered or living alone.” (p 103). So the space for “love, intimacy and passion” clearly has to do with the reality of practical opportunities, as well as the enigmatic mysteries surrounding the dialectics and personal histories of desire.

Desire is one aspect of ageing that “hits” our bodies, and as important as it may be to the quality and pleasures of life of old people, another component that is of at least equal importance is diminishing or failing health, illness, frailty, and impending death. Very few writers on old age, Lynne Segal included, with the possible exception of de Beauvoir (1972), have much to say about ageing and illness, ageing and the increasing incapacities of our bodies, and our approaching death. Given that it is not the most cheery topic it is not hard to see why authors, less so novelists, avoid writing about the depredations of ageing bodies (and minds). Although “minds” have been written about more often, and in particular with regard to a spouse dealing with a partner’s decline into senile dementia or Alzheimer’s. At one level, we can wonder what is there to say about our body’s decline into frailty and illness other than what would only be of interest to a gerontologist?

Nevertheless, there seems to be more to our avoidance of the topic of ageing bodies and imminent death than a certain queasiness of this unpleasant reality. This avoidance seems to have the status of psychological denial. The old don’t actually want to face the reality of their frailty and what this means for them, and especially with regard to an unavoidable dependence on other people for care. The loved ones, young and old, of the frail or sick old person are also keen to distance themselves from reality of possibly losing someone they have known and cared about for many years. And yet the irony is that by *not* avoiding the topic or reality of the death of a loved one we come to focus on life, their and our life. Karpf (2014: 122) interestingly notes that the “more we [and she means the old and non-old] engage with death when it isn’t imminent, the less we’ll require of older people that they be associated only with dying. Old age will no longer be a synonym for death, or dying, but for living.” Or as Segal herself writes: “It does now seem to me that being able to confront mortality, at least at times and however fearfully, may prove one way of being less disdainful and dismissive of old people.” (p 167).

Segal talks about the uncanny feeling of when we look into the mirror and see that ageing face staring back at us. Uncanny indeed, as the multiple selves of our various ages flash pass us. I want to focus rather on the uncanny as it relates to our knowing we are going to die (soon), and what our attitude should be to this. It is Freud’s (1985) notion of the uncanny that I am referring to rather than the dictionary sense of uncanny as something mostly mysterious, bizarre, ghostly, and creepy. What these definitions don’t capture is the sense in which the uncanny is unsettling because it is simultaneously not known nor familiar. Freud (1985: 341) suggests that “The German word ‘*unheimlich*’ is obviously the opposite of ‘*heimlich*’ (‘homely’), ‘*heimisch*’ (‘native’) – the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar. Naturally not everything that is new and unfamiliar is frightening, however; the relation is not capable of inversion.” In what sense would our coming deaths be knowable, and what would it mean to be familiar with our death? Thinking about our deaths, especially if we are old *and healthy*, seems to qualify as being an uncanny experience, and one that makes it difficult to know how and what we should think about this, if we should think about it at all. It seems to me that Freud (1985) holds a notion that the uncanny is most apparent as a secular view of life and death. Freud (1985: 365) writes that “Considering our unchanged attitude towards death, we might rather inquire what has become of the repression, which is the necessary condition of a primitive feeling recurring in the shape of something uncanny. But repression is there, too. All supposedly educated people have ceased to believe officially that the dead can become visible as spirits, and have made any such appearances dependent on improbable and remote conditions; their emotional attitude towards their dead, moreover, once a highly ambiguous and ambivalent one, has been toned down in the higher strata of the mind into an unambiguous

feeling of piety.” Freud (1985), however, is not content to limit the emergence of the uncanny to the psychological process of repression, and for him this only partly fulfils how we might experience, *and* understand the uncanny. In other words, the uncanny *exceeds* the operation of repression, and like death, the notion of the uncanny itself is uncanny! Freud (1985: 370) notes that his preliminary investigation into the notion of the uncanny may “have satisfied *psychoanalytic* interest in the problem of the uncanny, and that what remains probably calls for an *aesthetic* inquiry.” This probably points to the fact that some of the best writing about the ordinariness and uncanniness of ageing and death comes from memoirs, novels, and poetry. Maybe literary modes of writing and expression are more easily able to respond to some of the vexing questions of old age: what does it mean to grow old?; how do we age?; how would we like to age?; and not to forget, how will we die?, and how would we like to die?

These questions about ageing, tellingly, don’t seem to feature that often in the analytical categories in critical social theory. It is though the left have also succumbed to the neo-liberal view about retirement being a period of “unproductive” labour, of leisure time, and thus not worthy of analysis. A society based on market values and productivity in the service of the creation of surplus value pays little attention on one hand to the fact that many people live at least 15-20 years beyond retirement age of 60 or 65, thanks in part to the advances of modern medicine, unless on the other hand that demographic of old people, especially those with disposable incomes, can be a target group to sell something to, whether it is Viagra or “luxury” retirement homes. And so critical theory needs to be interested in how we are aged by culture, and what forms of inequality and discrimination old people are subjected to. While Segal’s objectives in her book aren’t to directly attend to the lacunae in critical theory regarding the aged, her text in many instances *is* a critical theory of ageing. Segal refers to the work of Margaret Morganroth Gullette, who she calls “the impressive self-styled feminist ageist resister” (p 16), who in “[e]laborating further on the need for ‘Age Studies’, Gullette notes that although *critical theory* has been busy making trouble for and attempting to subvert so many of the old binaries producing and marking identity, highlighting the role of culture and language in securing hierarchies of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and more has *rarely turned its attention to age.*” (pp 16-17, emphases added).

Regardless of the relative absence of a strong critical theory tradition in ageing and old age as a social category intersected by gender, class, race, there is the puzzling lack of interest in ageing and old people as a site of remembrance, memory, the past, and personal and social histories, theoretical topics that in other spheres of work have captured the imagination and intellectual labour efforts of critical and left scholars. In a slightly different vein, but nevertheless pertinently, Segal reflects on this aspect of a life lived and remembered, when she asks, “a slightly different question nags at me ... [and that is] can the recognition, status, pleasures and satisfactions of our remembered past, or perhaps I should say our reconstructions of what we once had or achieved, sustain us in later life, as times change and the rewards of the present often become more elusive? Or do the satisfactions of the past serve more to magnify and mock whatever might be felt as the losses and limitations in the ageing present?” (p 72).

Segal is not unaware of how hard it is to age, while at the same being open to being delighted by the pleasures that are still part of our (future) old age, even if looking back we sometimes feel mocked by our past! The difficulty that many old people experience of becoming dependent, and thus seemingly a burden on others, is a powerful reason why old people “so forcefully insist that they ‘do not feel old’, making ‘old age’ something to be disavowed whatever our age. Yet the idea that ‘dependence’ may be a collaborative process is rarely mentioned.” (p 261) That humans are

inherently dependent creatures is often forgotten, and this is not only the case in infancy, but throughout our lives. Being dependent on people, and being dependable for other people, is surely the hallmark of a social humanity, and not just a feature of the aged.

Ageing well and imaginatively, is dependent on a number of factors, and even luck seems to be one of them. The fact that unfortunately so many people in our society do not age well, or at least with the proper care to assist them with their frailties and illnesses, is a function of a society with seriously misplaced priorities of what it means to make resources available so that people can flourish, and when the time comes die with dignity and comfort. The ravages of class society are visited on the (poor) aged with a fury that they often can't oppose or defend themselves against. So, it is with a cautious optimism that Segal has most often spoken about the "pleasures" of ageing rather than the "perils" of ageing. As she notes in her final chapter, entitled "Affirming survival": "As I have said often enough, any source of optimism in old age requires a platform of economic security and wellbeing, one that in the foreseeable future will never be the preserve of all in old age, even less so as cut-backs in care facilities and threats to pension rights continue to undermine its possibility." (p 274).

Finally, there is a task for us to ignite an interest in ageing and old age as legitimate topics for research and analysis in critical social and psychological study. Lynne Segal's eloquent and politically engaged text shows us how we might begin this task. Reading **Out of time** I got the impression that she enjoyed writing this book as much as I enjoyed reading and reviewing it.

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