

AGE STUDIES

**A Sociological Examination of How
We Age and Are Aged Through the
Life Course**

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AGE STUDIES: WHAT IS IT AND WHY DO WE NEED IT?

The Age System

To discover what we mean when discussing the age system we should consider the figure of the 'old Hag'¹ as depicted by Rodin.² The sense of horror and tragedy, of dread and pity we feel in her presence represents the distillation of the age system (which is also a sexist system) and as such defines it.



The old Hag appears in many forms but in each case she depicts the deep resistance towards old age that is located in our collective consciousness. A memorable section from towards the end of H. Rider Haggard's Victorian 'penny dreadful' *She* reads:

I gazed at her arm. Where was its wonderful roundness and beauty? It was getting thin and angular. And her face – by Heaven! – *her face was growing old before my eyes...* she put her hand to her head and touched her hair – and oh, *horror of horrors!* – it all fell upon the floor... her skin changed colour, and in place of the perfect whiteness of its lustre it turned dirty brown and yellow, like a piece of withered parchment. ... Now the skin was puckered into a million wrinkles, and on the shapeless face was the stamp of unutterable age. I never saw anything like it; nobody ever saw anything like the frightful age that was graven on that fearful countenance. ... She, who but two minutes before had gazed upon us the loveliest, noblest, most splendid woman the world has ever seen, she lay still before us... hideous – ah, too hideous for words.

Thirdly, in a more contemporary version of the Hag (represented by the figure of Kate Moss, on the right), she is more ordinary and everyday than in our previous versions. Moreover, she is chronologically only middle-aged; the spectacular decline is shown by picturing her next to a much younger woman, Cara Delevingne (23 to Kate's 41) and meanwhile the traditional moral overtone is hidden within the 'neutral' language of a scientific discourse that identifies and analyses her facial faults and marks of age.



The article (Anon, 2015) which this photograph illustrates begins: 'It takes a brave – or foolish – woman to stand next to a rival almost half your age, especially when she's just taken your crown as the UK's highest paid supermodel... So how has Kate's face changed since she exploded into the British fashion world as a teenager in 1988 – before Cara was even born?' It then goes on to list these 'changes' (all negative) according to the following categories: (i) crow's feet and wrinkles; (ii) smoker's teeth; (iii) puffy cheeks; (iv) brittle hair; (v) thinning lips; (vi) greying skin, each problem employing the relevant expert opinion from dentists, dermatologists, 'hair scientists' and the like, the gleeful pleasure of the journalist barely suppressed beneath this.

In the photograph Kate Moss is positioned so that all these features are displayed to full effect: eyes crinkled up in a smile; shiny lips highlighting the loss of plumpness and pulled apart to reveal her imperfect teeth; cheeks puffed out to further accentuate the deep network of crinkles encircling her eyes. Meanwhile, her 'rival' (actually, her friend and someone whom she has mentored) stands next to her in the pose of a Renaissance painting's maiden, head lowered, large eyes raised, smile demure. Readers, especially those who remember Kate when she was herself the maiden figure, are surely unsettled by this transformation but the article seeks to reassure using scientific discourse to instruct us how Kate has committed a series of misdemeanours, indulging in excesses of alcohol, smoking, sunbathing, unseemly emotions. If Cara, and the readers, avoid these temptations, is the implicit message we too can avoid her fate: that of growing old.

Indeed, where Freud once suggested that sexuality lay at the heart of all our neuroses, and Erik Erikson later suggested that for the twentieth century our key problems, at a cultural and personal level, revolved around issues of identity, today it seems that our defining existential crisis is our fear of ageing and old age. Specifically, this concerns the repression of ageing and death (Brown, 1959). This fear, moreover, has real material consequences throughout the life course in terms of the organization of modern society, and indeed the above representations crown a system of stratification that ensures ongoing social inequality with an ideology that justifies it. The age system is a hierarchically constituted regime in which the role of particular ages and their relationship to each other underpin and legitimize an assortment of material and other inequalities. These work with other forms of inequality to produce a complex meshwork of social stratification (Calasanti and Slevin, 2001; 2006). Whilst non-adult stages are particularly disadvantaged, 'adulthood' is at once chronologically and symbolically constituted, meaning that some members of this category are more 'adult' than others. The most disadvantaged and devalued category of all, however, is that of old age. Age therefore serves as a 'master status' (Calasanti and Slevin, 2006: 5), its ideological power wielded through a 'master narrative of decline' (Gullette, 1997). Margaret Gullette has described how the plot of the narrative unfolds as follows: Youth is the best time of our life, associated with all things positive such as 'fun, energy, sexuality, intensity, hope' (1997: 5). As we approach mid-life we are taught to look for signs of decline signalled through events such as

the 'Mirror Scene of Mid-life Ageing' or the 'Entrance into Mid-life Scene'. When we encounter these entry points – our shock at our lined face, reflected back at us from the mirror of a friend or lover's gaze, or photograph; surprise at the aged appearance of same-age peers; students who no longer recognize you as one of them but liken you to their parents; or, even worse, that moment when you realize you no longer relate to your students – we begin to lose our former confidence in our abilities, our self-esteem, our optimism, and thereafter we accelerate into 'decline/oldage (single word) and death' (1997: 8).

Whilst decline ideology presents this stratification as a natural 'fact', it also presents as natural the concept that ageing accrues deficit and loss of a range of capitals. However, this is established through a range of meanings and imperatives that impact on all ages and stages in the life course. That is, just as one can only be a 'man' in a world that also contains women, one can only be young in a world in which other individuals are 'old' or indeed today 'middle-aged' (and the very meaning of youth is thus infused with such ideology). Age ideology, although superficially favouring 'the young', in fact has damaging consequences for everyone. So it makes 'youth' a space in which particular imperatives and modes of subjectification work, moulding the citizen in ways that are as dominated as they are dominant. For example, the fact that youth is commonly depicted in the West as the best time of our lives may mean that the very real problems and suffering experienced by the young are not taken seriously; or alternatively, structural obstacles may be misread as individual failure. Furthermore, the fear of ageing means that 'ageing' (which includes, but is more than the relational experience of, feeling 'old') is felt at ever-younger points in the life course (Gullette, 1997; 2004), the Hag trails her longer and longer shadow behind her through much of the life course and beyond a certain (increasingly earlier) age, today's birthdays are sources of melancholy or dread, especially for women. Many young women in my seminar groups speak of being 'traumatized' by turning 20, and, as well as the bruising I remember receiving from that age, I can recall traumas of earlier ages: the tingling anxiety of turning 13 and, before that, turning 11, which meant leaving primary school for high school and the hollow feeling in my stomach registering the first, but not the last, time when I felt the best of life was behind me already. Looking back, turning 30, 35 or even 40 were not the deeply significant events whose presence had brooded for some time on the horizon ahead with the dark weight of curtains about to come down. However, whilst they turned out in practice to be inconsequential in themselves, the dread I experienced in anticipation of such birthdays was very real, and, I see now, impacted deeply on my sense of self, of who I was and what I thought I could become, for much of my life.

Fear of ageing is one of the key vehicles through which society acts upon us from within and is thus an extremely powerful mode of social control. As well as proclaiming our value in terms of youthfulness, which overlaps with but is not absolutely the same as youth, it also encourages us to try to remain 'young'. Inevitably, this leads to an infantilization in which we remain not only youthful but immature, distracted by a thousand trivial decisions – what washing machine to buy, what TV station to watch – rather than taking responsibility for the kind of life we live: as Susan Neiman

puts it, 'children make more compliant subjects (and consumers)' (2014: 186). At the same time, the mythologization of youth in itself induces compliance, as Neiman continues: 'by describing life as a downhill process, we prepare young people to expect – and demand – very little from it: especially where being young is not, actually, so wonderful' (2014: 17). It is thus extremely important in a political sense that we are alert to the age system and thus prepared to critique and challenge it.

In the following sections we shall prepare the grounds for this critique by exploring: (i) the psychic origins of the age system in the relationship with the Mother, including the contradictory desire for communion/separation and the splitting and projection of associated qualities onto separate genders and ages; (ii) its intellectual origins in a Cartesian worldview that echoes this process of separation and individuation with all its irresolvable fears and longings; (iii) its material aspect in a capitalist system in which age relations intersect with, and serve as vehicles for, a variety of other forms of inequality; (iv) its legitimation through intellectual thought and social theories in which sociology (albeit inadvertently) is also implicated. Although we start here with the micro level we could just as easily have reversed the order and started with the macro level, labelling this (i); the important point is that each level be considered not separate from, but rather involved in, a mutual and constitutive interplay with the rest. We will also (v) examine specific factors which mean that in late modernity the age system works in a particularly profound way to underpin an acute and growing social inequality.

Configuring the Hag

(i) The psychic beginnings in infancy

The beginnings of the age system are to be found in the dynamics of the first and primary social relationship, that is, in the psychic experience of the relationship with one's mother or mother-substitute in the very earliest days of infancy. This is discussed in some detail in the work of Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976), Jessica Benjamin (1990) and other object relations theorists. Indeed, the symbolic power of the Hag has its roots in the infant's struggle to individuate from an intensely close emotional and physical unity with the mother. Here, the psychic terrain is shaped by our social practices, both the expectations and interpretations that cultural narratives and practices bring to this relationship and the fact that institutional factors mean that responsibility for child-rearing falls mainly to women; the feelings of ambivalence and rejection towards the figure from which one must separate are then associated with the female body/self. Dinnerstein's (1976) classic account of how this 'shapes' the human condition remains just as persuasive, and relevant, today as it did when Dinnerstein wrote in the mid-70s (and indeed the social forms on which they are based – childcare responsibilities borne primarily by the mother, with little institutional support, among other things – remain all but unchanged since those times, in the UK and US at least). She argues:

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

Concurring with Norman Brown, she suggests that the socio-cultural denial of death – including the horror of signs of ageing and senescence – results from our early recognition of bodily vulnerability. Woman (or Mother standing for all female bodies) is henceforth considered 'representative of the body principle in all of us that must be repressed when we embark on any significant enterprise' (1976: 126). But if the young mother reminds us of our intractable vulnerabilities, how much more terrible to behold is the old mother, upon whose now-withered breasts we, who are no-longer-children, once laid our heads?

Simone de Beauvoir shared these sentiments, reflecting that 'from the day of his birth man begins to die; this is the truth incarnated in the mother' (quoted in Dinnerstein, 1976: 127). The Mother represents the state of immanence, the in-itself which the Masculine subject needs to transcend.³ The problem is that the paradoxes which underlie an enduring form of existential anguish – the need for separation and boundaries that shape our selfhood, the loneliness and alienation that threaten to accompany this – rather than being integrated within the individual actor, are instead projected onto this other individual, the Mother, who becomes simultaneously both the closest intimate and the quintessential Other. It turns woman, Dinnerstein suggests, into a 'dirty goddess, a scapegoat-ideal, a quasi-human being' (p. 155) well on her way to becoming a Hag, even as a young mother, embodying as she does the 'mucky, humbling limitations of the flesh' (p. 133).

According to Benjamin (1990) the problem lies in a subsequent conceptual misidentification both of the initial mother–infant attachment and of the subsequent growing (self) awareness of the infant. The process is represented in developmental psychology as a 'separation from oneness'. But this is an ideal of a golden past that we project onto earliest infancy when in reality infants from the start engage in interpersonal connection with others. She suggests that the concept of separation as it stands

contains the implicit assumption that we grow out of relationships rather than becoming more active and sovereign within them, that we start in a state of dual oneness and wind up in a state of singular oneness. (1990: 18)

This state of oneness – associated with mature adulthood – is underpinned by a philosophy of individualism conjured memorably in the poem by Thom Gunn.⁴ Gunn depicts it as a state of extreme isolation, of alienation each from all, as if we were all surrounded by a fog that separated us and obscured us from knowing anything beyond our own thoughts: 'No castle more cut off / By reason of its moat'.

We can indeed only guess at what others are perceiving and feeling, the poem suggests, and whether our reality is shared by others is ultimately unknowable:

The street lamps, visible,
 Drop no light on the ground.
 But press beams painfully
 In a yard of fog around.
 I am condemned to be
 An individual

What begins as a misreading thus becomes a cultural ideology in which the psychic fear of being ‘sucked in’ or ‘back’ to what Freud and others portrayed as the oceanic wholeness of our pre-linguistic infancy in fact never completely abates but continues to threaten the ‘disintegration’ of our personhood, forever hovering ‘at the border of the subject’s identity, threatening apparent unities and stabilities with disruption and possible dissolution’ (Grosz, 1990: 871). This is the definition of abjection: the ‘abyss at the very borders of the subject’s identity, a hole into which the subject may fall’ (Grosz, 1990: 87). To offset this, rather than stressing autonomy and separation as developmental norms, as Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg and others have done, Gilligan (1982), Benjamin (1990) and others concur with Dinnerstein in suggesting the importance of emphasizing a dual developmental thread which includes care and relationships as well as autonomy making it a ‘dialectic of human development’ (Gilligan, 1982: 174). In social terms, however, the effect of the cultural ideology produces an incomplete realization of individuation expressed through the gender binary itself (MacInnes, 1998), whereby dual but contradictory elements of this process – the requirement for independence and the capacity for relationality – are split apart instead of being integrated within the individual and rather associated with ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. This represents a ‘defence against psychic insecurity’ (MacInnes, 1998: 29).

Further examples of splitting are effected through the age system, where attributes that adults may find difficult to recognize in themselves – being symbolic of vulnerability or incompetence or of characteristics that do not comply with the value system determined by capitalism’s framework – are projected onto children or old people, and which, though split off, remain powerful elements of their fantasy lives. This means that we not only organize childhood into a series of developmental stages defined with meticulous and ever-narrower precision but we also do the same at the other end of the life course, ‘frailty’ being increasingly scientifically portrayed in terms of discrete phases of ‘undevelopment’, or steps towards death.⁵ This would suggest that, although suppressed in cultural narratives, and indeed socialization processes, the reintegration of ageing and death would certainly unsettle the psychic dread of the abject and of the Hag herself (Brown, 1959). It would also undermine the foundation of the age and gender systems.

(ii) Cartesianism and the individuation of modernity

Bordo (1986) vividly illustrates the connections between such psychic origins and their socio-cultural consequences through her depiction of Cartesian dualism as a process of separation and individuation from the female universe of the old medieval cosmos enabling the emergence of the disenchanted masculine universe of the modern era.

BOX 1.1

Cartesianism

Cartesianism, the philosophical system associated with René Descartes and particularly his *Meditations*, posits a fundamental 'dualism' whereby mind (*res cogitans*) and body/matter (*res extensa*) are of different and incommensurable substances. The first is a thinking substance, the second subject to the laws of matter and both requiring totally different forms of inquiry.

This involves interplay between cultural narratives and individual experience which is constantly repeated on an individual level as in Elias' (1978) account of how the years-long development of children replicates on a minute scale the centuries-long civilizing process undergone by nations. In an account of the 'dialectics of separation and individuation' which Bordo offers as a 'way of seeing the Cartesian era empathetically and impressionistically, through association and image' (p. 448) and drawing on psychological categories normally used to describe individual development, she highlights the links between scientific objectivism, the rejection of the body, and the establishment of the motif of the Hag as emblematic of all the forces of dissolution threatening patriarchal rationalist society.

She suggests that the process of separating from the Mother was enacted on a cosmic level during the Enlightenment period as it broke with the medieval regime.

BOX 1.2

Enlightenment thought

The Enlightenment, or more generally enlightenment thought, refers to a system of thought associated with science in particular. Associated with the work of Descartes and others in early modernity, it fostered rational, impersonal and universalizable methods, together with a commitment to universal laws and values.

The Universe was spoken of as a Mother in medieval times; medieval epistemology also contained ‘feminine’ qualities, such as ‘sympathy’ or connection in which subject and object were perceived to merge in the creation of meaning (Bordo, 1999; Foucault, 2002). Cartesianism represents a defensive mode of detachment, a reaction to the feeling of loss of unity with the world, which extends to emotions, values and external objects. Thus, objectivity can be read as a ‘defiant gesture of independence from the female cosmos’ (Bordo, 1986: 431) and a compensatory ‘turning towards the paternal’ in the form of transcendent values and law (Bordo, 1999: 62). Meanwhile, the pain of separating and remaining separate is now compensated for by the aim of controlling that being from which one has separated, which it terms ‘female’ and inferior. As a result the ‘epistemic subject’ is one who ‘has become part of an objectified world over which we exercise mastery’, resolving our lives into a sense of projects characterized by ‘wanting and doing’, ‘making, producing and constructing’ (Dunne, 1993: 366). The self, personhood, within this system, is then essentially male.

The world is kept at arm’s length in this conceptualization wherein knowledge can only be truthful if it is obtained through detached, disinterested inquiry cleansed of value and sympathy and where even our most spontaneous, embodied gestures are based on an implicit theory of the world. Rationality, understood by Aristotle to include feeling and practical knowledge as well as detached logic, narrows and becomes gradually synonymous with instrumental rationality which is concerned with means–ends efficiency and encourages the subject to disengage from its messy and vulnerable existence (Taylor, 1992). Bordo goes on: ‘The project that fell to empirical sciences and “rationalism” was to tame the female universe’ (1986: 434). However, as with the abject body, this taming is always partial and unresolved: ‘Like the infinite universe, which threatens to swallow the individual “like a speck”, the female, with her strange rhythms, long acknowledged to have their chief affinities with the rhythms of the natural (now alien) world, becomes a reminder of how much lies outside the grasp of man’ (1986: 454). Hence, it was the Enlightenment that also witnessed a rash of witch trials (most of whom were old women), part of an attempt to bring female knowledge of the healing arts in particular, under male control (Greer, 1991; Daly, 1991). This was all the more so as ‘the meaning of life’ – lost with the disenchantment of modernity – was transformed first into a collective sense of progress through history and, when that began to atrophy in the twentieth century, further transformed into the meaning of ‘my life’ – an utterly privatized individualized search (Moody, 1986). Today this meaning is shaped largely through consumerist lifestyles with the key determining value being that of choice itself.

Finally, with the Enlightenment came a ‘civilizing process’ which, as Elias has shown, applied an increasing subjugation of the body by the mind with increasing constraint of bodily gestures and reactions, leading to greater individualization, rationalization, privatization and autonomy (Shilling, 2012) and, conversely, horror and disgust towards their opposite.

BOX 1.3**The civilizing process**

This refers to a system that spread from European courts down through the various layers of society during modernity. It constitutes a process of rationalization of bodies and behaviour, self-control and self-pacification, represented by elaborate systems of etiquette and manners.

The closed body extended control over the synapses and nerves, the urges and drives and orifices of bodies: everything from eating and defecation and copulation to expressions of anger and desire was subject to the sovereign control of the will. Unrealistic for the standard adult, it problematizes non-adult age in particular: childhood because, until children master these various forms of self-restraint, they are set apart from adults; and old people because continued control, or rather the presentation of an apparently controlled and controllable body, becomes harder to display in advanced age.

(iii) Capitalism and the work economy: a further separation from the Mother/Hag?

The Cartesian system is not just an intellectual approach but a ‘practical metaphysics’ (Bordo, 1999) and as such it informs all our systems and institutions, from our personal psychology, relationships of self to self and self to others, family dynamics, education, law and popular culture. Tracing its development through the nineteenth century, the processes of industrialization from the nineteenth century onwards added a material dimension to this separation first with the uprooting of traditional communities and the severance of ties formed by tradition and then with increasing rationalization, bureaucracy, alienation and the separation of individuals both from their work and from all other workers. Workers become ‘appendage(s) of the machine’ as Marx and Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto* (2010: 30) and sell themselves ‘piecemeal’.

BOX 1.4**Capitalism**

According to Marx and Engels, this is a system comprising those who own the means of production (capitalists or the ‘bourgeoisie’) and those who own only their own labour (the proletariat). The relationship of the former with the latter is inherently exploitative and oppressive.

'Clock-time' became hegemonic time, rationalized and separated from the eternal time of medieval holy time. This valorized speed, future-projection and linearity, removing time from any sense of context, and attributing normative or 'standard' time to a range of activities for the purpose of regulating individuals. The nature of clock-time is closely implicated in age ideology: time measured by industrial machine-rhythms is finite, linear, measurable, characterized by speed and uniformity, and unlike other times is like capital itself in that, above all, it is not only scarce but can run out (Adam, 1990). The feeling of time running out generates an omnipresent anxiety in individuals and a desire to control or transcend time; the ageing mother's body then becomes additionally a symbol of the dreadful consequences of being overwhelmed, finally, by time. Similarly, within modernity, dependence, once considered a 'normal' aspect of life, and associated with wage labour and with men, women and all ages and stages, became problematized. Independence was considered the prerequisite of full citizenship, now signalled by one's involvement in paid work and denied to women, children and, after the establishment of retirement, old people (Fraser and Gordon, 1994). Moreover, 'dependence' gradually moved 'inwards' shifting from a social characteristic to what Fraser and Gordon call an 'individual personality register', in the sense of some psycho-social failure of individualization and stigmatized accordingly. Referring to the collapse of epistemological levels, the authors suggest that today:

It still bears traces of the sexual division of labour that assigned men the role of breadwinners and women of caretakers and it is as if male breadwinners absorb into their personalities the independence associated with their economic role whilst female nurturers became saturated with the dependency of those for whom they care. (1994: 332)

Children and old people, similarly removed from the world of work, become most 'dependent' of all in this sense.

Systems of morality moved from a concern with the concrete and particular to the universal and abstract, as represented by Kantian reasoning which advocated that moral thought should proceed from the point of view of 'disinterested and disengaged moral actors' (Tronto, 1993: 9). Meanwhile, starting in the late nineteenth century and with increasing chronological definition up to the mid-years of the twentieth century, increasingly secularized states organized their subjects within a set of 'institutional boxes' comprising school, factory/workplace and workhouses/residential care homes and did so under the aegis of what Foucault calls 'pastoral' care, thus distinguishing it from disciplinary society. That is, directly owing to the disenchantment of society, 'it was no longer a question of leading people to their salvation in the next world, but rather ensuring it in this world' (Foucault, 1982: 215). Existential, if not transcendental, meaning, lost through disenchantment, is provided within this system by the ages and stages themselves, and, according to Foucault, salvation is synonymous, above all, with 'health'. In medicine, this was defined in

narrower terms. Medicine, with the changes in epistemology related to the patho-anatomical techniques that emerged in the 1830s, was following an ever more reductionist Cartesian model, involving a clear separation of mind and body, patient and disease and the further subdivision of the machine-like body into systems and organs analysable in isolation both from each other, and from the lived context of the patient, proceeded apace. Health was reduced to normality in this model involving an ability to maintain one's functionality, so the body in old age becomes a constant reminder of the limits of physical self-control, and thus signifies precisely what bourgeois culture hoped to avoid: dependence, disease, failure and sin. This then, resulted in the 'ideological and psychological splitting apart of negative and positive aspects of growing old' (Cole, 1986: 121) suggesting that the good aspects were available to those with sufficient virtue (enterprise, conscientiousness, responsibility and so forth).

Late modern governmentality has overseen an intensification of this splitting with the 'good' citizen of all ages made in the mould of the enterprising self-regulated citizen, achieved through practices of 'freedom' and exercised through consumption. Both the organizational ethos of business and the norms of consumerism serve to further distance us from the Hag. Indeed, the difference between liberal and neoliberal regimes can be seen in an increasing distancing of ageing and death from its place at the centre of life: no longer is economic behaviour about serving a Protestant God, as it was for the early capitalists, because God is now irrelevant since, as Wendy Brown puts it, the market has become *the* not *a* site for truth, including the truth of permanent youthful productivity and agency (Brown, 2015).

Organizational cultures project an image of immortality and focus on regeneration, valorizing the new, all strategies representing a denial of death, a process of feeding on the workers and disposing of them when they 'age' that Marx recognized as having a vampiric quality (Riach and Kelly, 2013). Consumerism similarly serves to effect a distance between our selves and any sense of our finitude. Noting that philosophers from Pascal to Kierkegaard have all acknowledged modern man's desire to 'constantly finish and to begin again from the beginning' (Bauman, 2001: 11), Bauman suggests that consumer culture shifts this impulse from an individual neurosis to a social and collective experience, which as well as ensuring social order and stability does so within the context of a culture that denies the Hag. That is, the cycle of buying and discarding and starting anew with a fresh purchase 'sublimates the wish to "constantly finish and begin again from the beginning" and forget about that end which is bound to finish it all' (2001: 11). Underpinned by a low rise in wages in comparison to the rising cost of living and an easy availability of credit, and in the twenty-first century, the introduction of 'austerity' measures in many Western countries, it signals a new phase of capitalism in the form of the debt economy. This has rendered the concept of independence ideological in the new sense of being linked to government retrenchment and increasing privatization (Eisenstein, 2005). Moreover, in late modernity the dualisms distinguishing active/passive, masculinity/femininity,

young/old, producer/consumer, construction/essence, care/work and so on have been destabilized, often appearing together in new and complex combinations, but without replacing them, and indeed without shaking existing hierarchies. We can see elements of this in the new gender regime and in the 'new' old age, both of which mix elements of masculinity and femininity, youth and old age, depicted as gender-*neutral* and *ageless*.

Medicine has continued to shape non-adult stages: the increasing association between old age and disease meaning that old age *is* bad old age, accompanied by a distinction between biological and chronological ageing, has led to the biologically youthful (those functioning as mid-life adults) distancing themselves from old age altogether. Similarly, the requirements on children to be enterprising and self-regulating has also led to many traditional aspects of childhood being viewed negatively, even seen as a disease and treated with drugs, for example, for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Wedge, 2015).

(iv) Social, cultural and symbolic approaches towards the Hag

It is within this expanded context that we can fully understand the symbolic location of the Hag. She comes to represent the loss and dissolution of a whole range of attributes and self-understandings that are repressed in the need for mastery of self, world and time. In the autonomous individual she remains the shadow, presenting the return of the repressed as an omnipresent threat. But worse, perhaps, and paradoxically, she also represents in her age and fragility the threat of the loss of the possibility of union, of the mythical wholeness which, according to the cultural myth of infant separation, we had to forsake in order to become persons. It is the sort of loss that we in the West might associate with growing up and which persists in a lifelong nostalgia, like that of an exile who can never return home. For women, the fear of the Hag may be commingled with the fear of turning into one's own mother (in the sense of a socially marginal, devalued subject). For men, whilst earlier in the life course it may represent fear of their hidden vulnerabilities, as they enter old age this transforms into the fear that they too are becoming feminized through both the physiological and social consequences of ageing in an ageist society.

Some of our most profound cultural attitudes towards age are crystallized in the vampire narrative, a vivid example of which is provided in the opening to *New Moon*, the second book of the 'Twilight' saga by Stephenie Meyer (and movie of the same name). The scene takes the form of a dream recounted by the main character, Bella, on the eve of her birthday. Bella's boyfriend, Edward, is a vampire, frozen at an eternally young seventeen, whilst Bella is about to turn eighteen, eliciting a whole array of anxieties. In the dream, Bella finds herself in a sunlit meadow together with her dead grandmother (and Edward arrives a little later).⁶

First, Bella notes her grandmother's appearance, the extreme agedness of the beloved face:

Gran hadn't changed much; her face looked just the same as I remembered it. The skin was soft and withered, bent into a thousand tiny creases that clung gently to the bone underneath. Like a dried apricot, but with a puff of thick white hair standing out in a cloud around it.

The fact that her grandmother has been dead these past six years seems to confirm the recognition, within the dream itself, that she is dreaming. But strangely, every movement or gesture of Bella's is at the same time made by her grandmother. 'Our mouths – hers a wizened pucker – spread into the same surprised half-smile at just the same time.' Finally the recognition dawns upon Bella that the old woman before her is not, in fact, her Grandma Marie but her own self, many years in the future, reflected back at her in an enormous gilt mirror:

With a dizzying jolt, my dream abruptly became a nightmare.

There was no Gran.

That was *me*. Me in a mirror. Me – ancient, creased, and withered.

Edward stood beside me, casting no reflection, excruciatingly lovely and forever seventeen.

He pressed his icy, perfect lips against my wasted cheek.

'Happy birthday,' he whispered.

Although the old woman is portrayed tenderly, at least when Bella mistakes her for her grandmother, what turns the dream into a nightmare is the distance the image opens up, both between the lovers and between what Bella is now and what she will one day be, a fact that sets up a split at the core of her being. (The last lines of the excerpt from H. Rider Haggard express the same sentiment: 'And yet, think of this... it was the *same* woman!') But if Bella cannot accept ageing at some level she cannot accept life at all, not even her youth, which some maintain is the best bit, because ultimately it means nothing without the 'old' against which backcloth it is always already contrasted. Simone de Beauvoir captured this paradox with the lines: 'If we do not know what we are going to be, we cannot know what we are: let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman' (1996: 5). Of course, this being a fantasy novel, Bella chooses a fantastic way out of this conundrum, opting for a non-human life in which she can live forever young. So far this is not an option open to the rest of us.

Both our institutions and our intellectual theories bolster each other in terms of normalizing and embedding the age system in our everyday practices. Psychological theories of development, biomedical approaches to health and normality and sociological theories of gender and identity are all infused with age-ideological assumptions

including: the normality of stability over change; the taken-for-granted arc of growth–stasis–decline; and the centrality of the youthful perspective in theory-building.

We can also perceive the age system in symbolic terms, by means of a dimensional grid relating to the four key domains, namely the body, identity, place and social class which, in every society, in all eras, according to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, are ‘all constructed within interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low’ (1986: 2). Within this system, the extremes are particularly important, for it is here that our struggles for order and sense are put to the test, our unresolved paradoxes illuminated and the interplay of rules and transgressions located. If we then consider where the lowest points in all four domains intersect we will find the poor, old, frail woman. This explains the power of the Hag to disgust where Menninghaus’ description links the sensation of disgust to this process of ‘social othering’. She notes: ‘Everything seems at risk in the experience of disgust. It is a state of alarm and emergency, an acute crisis of self-preservation in the face of an unassimilable otherness’ (2003: 1). The Hag is the symbol, nested within modernity, of the aspects of life from which our intellectual and social system has painstakingly worked to distance us; but this is at the same time constituted by our hierarchies and does not exist outside them.

Within this framework, ‘resistance’ takes the form of ‘transgression’ but Mary Douglas’ (1966) work suggests that it is not straightforward rule-breaking or reversal of the existing norms – the low pole replacing the high – that is perceived as most threatening but rather ambiguity and disorder: the presence of hybridization of categories (Jenks, 2005). Examples might include: the ‘woman’ who is no longer fertile; the child who is precocious either in talent or in perpetrating ‘adult’ deeds (sex, murder); the old person who enjoys dependency. This threatens, Douglas suggests, our sense of order and sense-making but simultaneously highlights the underlying order that nevertheless exists (social constructions of women’s ‘telos’ (still) lying in reproduction; children as asexual, etc.). For that reason, it has the potential to be both radical and conservative. Foucault puts the pessimistic view: ‘Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being’ (1977a: 35) whilst Stallybrass and White remain more sanguine about its potential suggesting that, despite its undoubted absorption in the established order ‘it *may often act as catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle*’ (1986: 14; original emphasis). Where ambiguity plays a particularly prominent role in the system it is strongly associated with pollution beliefs. According to Douglas, pollution beliefs do the job of mediating the friction between tensions within the system, for example between political and legal changes and socio-cultural continuity. Thus, the idea that the Hag is dangerous and can have power over us – such as in the witch figure – also suggests that our new norms of anti-ageism and age fluidity co-exist with older attitudes towards age.

This symbolic grid enables us also to discern that it is in the particular ambiguity of mid-life, a state of being that is neither young nor old, in which many are experiencing the onset of ill health, redundancy and financial constraints, where others are at their peak powers, and in which individuals oscillate between positive and

negative views of their capability, that the most potent threat to the age system resides (Gullette, 1997). This explains the increasing problematization of mid-life that is a feature of social discourse. Seeing through age ideology at this stage renders individuals potentially ungovernable and the system potentially unworkable.

Meanwhile age ideology underpins an increasing social inequality as we discuss next.

(v) Social inequality: degrees of distance from the Hag

The antithesis of the Hag, representing the culturally valorized pole, modernity's aspiration, is vividly captured in a scene within the 2011 sci-fi movie *In Time* (directed by Andrew Niccol), in which grandmother, mother and daughter appear at a party side by side, all indistinguishable from the other, all three not a day beyond twenty-five physiologically speaking, within a regime wherein money buys time (see <http://www.examiner.com/slideshow/in-time-movie-stills>).

Indeed *In Time* suggests an alternative possibility to the progress-followed-by-decline arc that characterizes age ideology. In this film, set in a dystopian future and depicting a super capitalist state with extremes of wealth and poverty, people stop ageing physically on their twenty-fifth birthdays: thereafter they must 'buy' time (measured in minutes or hours) through their labour (regularly downgraded so that their wages buys them less of it). At the other end of the scale the rich accrue capital as vast amounts of time (measured in hundreds and even millions of years) amassed in the cavernous vaults of time banks. Money, in this film, *is* time. This is a society that has banished the Hag, or at least repressed her (death comes to the youthful but only to the youthful poor) so in many ways, then, it represents the apogee of the Cartesian dream.

This can be seen as an exaggerated metaphor for today's society and for the increasingly symbolic nature of adulthood therein. The top 1 per cent of the population in the UK (comprising a large proportion of the 'adults') receive upwards of 15 per cent of all income (risen from an average of around 7 per cent in the 1970s), just behind the US where the percentage is above 20 per cent. Today this group owns over a third of all marketable assets (excluding housing) whilst the bottom half (the 'children' symbolically) share 1 per cent of the nation's total wealth (Dorling, 2014; Roberts, 2011); in the US the top CEOs make 331 times the salary of average workers in a gap which has grown by 1000 per cent since 1950 (Dill, 2014, 2013). Professionals are part of the better-paid 99 per cent, rather than constituting part of the elevated group, suggesting in addition their loss of socio-political influence, as compared with the bankers, financiers and corporate chief executives who make up the 1 per cent.⁷ In a situation of such growing inequality, where health disparities and mortality rates are also class-related throughout the life stages, the rich (mostly financiers) can project all their fears and vulnerabilities onto the poor, from whom they are increasingly removed, insulating themselves from the fear of ageing and death. Through their consumer power they are able to use all the latest medical and other interventions to stay 'youthful' – visible ageing itself becomes the sign of the abject – and ultimately, they hope to defy death itself in a logical extension of

the capitalist mastery of *res extensa*. The extreme (high) position of our symbolic grid is represented by companies like the Alcor Life Extension Foundation which offers cryonics at a very high price and also assists with the legal preservation of one's assets for the time when one is revived, a time when 'ageing itself will be a treatable, reversible condition as medicine attains full control of the human body at the molecular level' (see www.alcor.org/). More moderate examples are represented by the numerous biotech Silicon Valley companies serving the interests of the very rich both as potential consumers of life extension technologies, and as beneficiaries of profits in what is becoming a highly lucrative business opportunity. In parallel, the disempowered are increasingly infantilized, their incomes akin to 'pocket money' to the rich, with resultantly decreased control and autonomy in work and life.

One of the main objections to the argument that age and ageing is increasingly important is the suggestion that age norms are more relaxed than they ever have been and that the distinction between all ages is lessening. But here *In Time* again provides some clues as to the broader meaning and purpose of this apparent age equality. *In Time* has only one valid age category – that of mature biological youthfulness, associated with the prime of life – and what lies to either side is childhood and death (but not old age in this instance). Inequality is centred around the ability to maintain a greater or lesser degree of rational adult personhood, through either enterprising activities by the elite or donkey work necessary for material survival by the poor, each involving varying degrees of time-capital. Mega-capitalists, like Marx's vampires, draw their supplies of time from the youthful labour of their workers. That is, this age stage is a symbolic category only loosely attached to chronology. In late modernity also, to an important extent, ages and stages have become symbolic categories detached from chronology and synonymous with individualized qualities, from irrationality, to responsibility to dependency and invested with more or less value, material rewards, and social power.

I will argue in this book that in late modernity the fluidity of age norms ('agelessness') is one factor, alongside a rhetorical commitment to gender equality, that has served as a 'solvent' (Eisenstein, 2005), albeit unwittingly, to release groups formerly 'protected' from the market into first, the labour economy, and, thereafter with the rise of neoliberalism, the ensuing market society (Sandel, 2012). The blurring of clear age categories co-exists with symbolic forms of adulthood that may not coincide with 'chronological' adulthood. This symbolic 'age patriarchy' holds power, shaping material conditions and cultural norms. Age, gender and class together underpin a cultural and material infantilization of those who have not acquired sufficient capital to be full adults. Age norm fluidity encourages a valued idea of the 'self', transcending age groups as agentic, autonomous and self-determining, through enterprising skills and consumer-based lifestyles. Age ideology serves powerfully to naturalize these changes, and to obscure the deepening structural inequalities that cross-hatch society. Moreover, of all body-based characteristics that have been employed to justify inequality – such as gender and race – age alone remains a 'fact' in both the popular and much of the intellectual imagination, and thus is all the more powerful for that.

Age studies, age ideology and social theory: the scope of this book

As a sociological text, this book positions itself within a disciplinary tradition whose central concepts, such as class and identity, are somewhat atemporal in their focus and do not incorporate change over the life course, except as crisis or discontinuity. Indeed, the founding fathers of sociology all assumed a Cartesian perspective, privileging rational (prime-of-life male) action and treating women as pre-social. The normative viewpoint from which society was viewed and theories elaborated was that associated with prime of life/mid-life. 'Age' remains mostly the interest of subfields, comprising childhood, youth studies and social gerontology and is otherwise introduced as an add-on to mainstream sociology's key theories. Despite the insights that arose from feminism, race and disability studies, the opportunity either to build a more temporal or longitudinal element into mainstream theorizing, or to test the applicability and complexity of mainstream theories across the fluctuations of the life course, has not been seized, leading to acquiescence in the age-ideological assumptions of scientific and lay views.

This book will begin to address this issue first by suggesting two methodological approaches in the form of delineating parallels with: (i) the class system; and (ii) the gender regime, demonstrating how (a) the age system is a socially constructed vehicle for inequality, in parallel to the former two systems, but also (b) how age works with class and gender to naturalize social inequality. It will then seek to explore a range of lived experience, including identity and embodiment, gender and sexuality, together with the analytic concepts employed to understand them, examining in each case: (i) how age serves to introduce socially constructed hierarchies in these fields; and (ii) how sociological theories, perhaps with modification, can serve as tools to identify and challenge this process, including the age ideological foundations of our social world as set out in the preceding pages.

In this aim, this book positions itself within the remit of age studies which Gullette defines as 'the interdisciplinary movement that wants to disrupt the current age system in theory and practice' (1997: 18). In attempting to denaturalize age ideology and critique age relations, this book is informed by three methodological assumptions and one ontological conviction, or belief about the nature of being; in addition it has a critical aim and a particular standpoint, all of which I will detail next.

The first methodological assumption contends that both the possibilities and constraints contained within each stage of the life course cannot be understood without examining the intersections with class and gender in particular. Thus, none of the stereotypical attributes of the life stages are attributable to age in itself: not the opportunities of youth (for some), nor the disappointments or transformations of mid-life (for others), nor the comfortable leisured lifestyle in young-old age, nor the constraints and challenges, social, material and physical in old-old age (for such are the stereotypes attributable to each stage of the life course) are attributable to *age itself*.

The second methodological assumption moves away from a strong constructionism in holding that the material attributes of the body that change and fluctuate

through the life course, without our conscious involvement, are as much a part of our embodied ontology as is the self-invention that postmodernity celebrates. However, the meanings of these bodily states have their source in society, in particular in the hierarchical structures that separate ages from each other as well as stratifying them internally, all cross-cut by the axis that places youth to the positive side and old age to the negative. The 'realness' of age extends to the concrete experience associated with our existence as beings-in-time, and our positioning at stages of the life course, but both the meaning and the embodied experience of age(s) is entirely variable according to the wider cultural scripts and social practices. Notions of a 'universal' or timeless experience of age and ageing themselves require critical scrutiny rather than serving as a starting assumption.

The **third methodological assumption** derives from feminist standpoint theory, which argues that all knowledge is 'situated knowledge' (Harding, 2004). The 'legitimate' or intellectual tradition, they note, from science and medicine through to the canons of English literature, is patriarchal, infused with the perspective of bourgeois men and positions women as Other, a normative position that carries the label of 'objectivity'. What is notable is the extent to which both this tradition *and* feminist epistemology contain a normative age perspective: that of the prime-of-life adult. From this understanding comes the importance of foregrounding one's own perspective, and not presenting it as 'disinterested', including when discussing the topic of age.

For this latter reason I feel it is important to declare at the outset something of my own perspective. This book is written from the standpoint of a woman, now in mid-life, who has been fascinated by age, ageing and old age since I was three or four years old. This was the time in my life when I spent every weekend from Friday night to Sunday afternoon at my grandmother's house so that my parents could watch their little (failing) shop without having me as an additional worry. Despite the age gap of some 75 years, it was the similarities between Nana and I that struck me most forcefully, not just the dispositions and shared family history, but also the knowledge that we occupied a different place in society to the grown-ups (Nana was not a 'grown-up', I understood, but an 'old lady') and that, through and beyond that, the existential similarities of childhood and old age brought us together. For example, we shared a similar phenomenological experience of time and space, valued the garden, playtime and mealtimes more than the grown-ups seemed to. Yet, in other ways, my approach to my grandmother abounded in contradictions and paradox. She was physically robust, digging her garden and determinedly walking half a mile up a steep hill to the nearest shop, always in her best cream coat and hat, but my parents thought of her as weak and fragile and I learned to hold both 'truths' simultaneously in my head. The intimation of hidden fragility may have lain beneath my obsessive anxiety that she was going to die, and probably soon, maybe even today. I shared her bed during these weekend sojourns and I would always awaken what seemed like hours before her and lie there watching the ponderous rise and fall of the big mound of her body beneath the eiderdown, listening to her laboured breathing, terrified that it would stop.

One evening some fifteen years later I found myself sharing these experiences with fellow undergraduates at a writing group to which I belonged. The story I had brought along to read recounted a weekend I had spent with my grandmother all those years ago and I remember feeling really flattered when it received particularly rapturous praise from two young men. 'I felt, when you were reading it,' said the tall, blond one called Henry, in nostalgic tones, 'that you could have been talking about *my* grandmother.' At Oxford many boys had gone to Harrow or Eton and Henry was among them. This group of gilded, godly youth seldom if ever talked to us plebs except, with awkward politeness, if we happened to be partnered up with them at tutorials, or in muted heterotopias like this College club. Uncommonly flattered as I was in this context, his remark also filled me with some confusion, however; I thought back to my grandmother's cold and draughty rented house and tried to imagine Henry in such surroundings, seated at his grandmother's knee; could it be possible? Pulling myself out of my reverie, I thanked him, but just as I was doing so, I noticed something hard and crystalline about his gaze, and I felt myself frozen in it, fixed and tiny. At once I knew that the two paces between us encompassed a vast distance; although I did not then have the sociological theories to explain all this it was clear that this both was and was not the same old age we were talking about. Thus from these beginnings, and other such defining moments, I have nursed a lifelong interest in age in general and old age in particular, in its phenomenology and politics, in the nature of the relationship between generations, in the intersections between poverty and privilege and the co-presence of general truths and unique details that mean that old age, perhaps above all other ages, both unites and separates us.

This leads directly to the **critical part of this project** (in the sense coined by Horkheimer, aiming at changing, rather than simply understanding, society) which moves beyond analysis to posing two specific questions:

- (i) How do we imbue ages and stages with roles and meaning outside those associated with current hierarchies, dualisms and polarities? And
- (ii) How do we re-envision the meaning of old age and thereby undermine age ideology's grip on our cultural imagination? Specifically, how do we challenge the view of ageing-as-deficit, and replace it with a more balanced and positive (but not age-denying) sense and significance that impacts on our embodied ontology throughout life more generally?

In short, the book asks, not only: can we see things differently? But also: how can sociological theories, rendered sensitive to age and change, contribute to seeing and doing otherwise? This question acquires urgency in the context of increasing longevity throughout the developed world. The latest World Health Organization figures (2015) suggest a life expectancy of 87 and 80 for Japanese women and men respectively at birth, in what is the longest-living advanced urban country (behind Monaco); the figures for the UK are 83 and 79 respectively. In Japan, 26 per cent

of the population is aged 65 and over, making it a hyper-aged society; UK and US figures are at 17 per cent and 14 per cent respectively (Coulmas, 2007). Meanwhile, the oldest old is the fastest-growing section of the older population throughout the developed world (Higgs and Gilleard, 2015).

Finally, the **underpinning ontological conviction** follows this critical aim, and it is that regimes that foster freedom can be distinguished from those which do not; that different regimes do not simply involve different clusters of knowledge/power but that some of the latter are more conducive to human growth/wellbeing/self-expression, for majority and minority groups, than others. It is for this reason that this book positions itself within the Enlightenment tradition, whilst recognizing both the myopias and excesses particularly in the application of its principles at the hands of the philosophers and scientists that followed Descartes. For the latter reasons, it employs both hermeneutics and genealogy which are often seen as contradictory or clashing methodologies. Whilst the first is, of course, central to the Enlightenment tradition, and used by both Marx and Freud among others in pursuit of 'the truth', the latter, associated with Foucault and other deconstructionists, sees only more combinations of power and knowledge with no essential foundation of truth lying at the bottom. However, employed together they correct each other's blind spots, as Ferguson suggests: 'genealogy keeps interpretation honest, and interpretation gives genealogy direction' (1993: 30) in terms of its political aims. That is, whilst a search for foundations may be misplaced, still this does not rule out the possibility of flourishing and emancipation. Regardless of whether we are aware of it personally, the age regime is one of those things that limits flourishing and challenging it is thus an emancipatory aim.

In addition, in working within the Enlightenment tradition, I wish to highlight two contradictory strands which Charles Taylor (1985) describes in terms of: (i) the aim of objectivity; a Cartesian throwing-back of the individual thinker on his/her own responsibility which 'requires him to build an order of thought for himself' (1985: 182). But 'he' must do so impersonally in a way that underpins scientific knowledge and general 'truths'; (ii) the Romantic emphasis on the particularity and originality of the individual, the authenticity that constitutes standpoint. I will draw on both approaches in this book. So the idea, for example, originating with Descartes, to stop living blindly through experiences – to disengage from them, to treat them as objects – engenders a radical reflexivity, depriving the experience of its power. Such an approach is necessary to see how the age system operates independently of us and works through our assumptions including our age identities. On the other hand, the search for an authentic age identity that then follows involves throwing ourselves fully into the experience, 'being "all there", being more attentively "in" our experience' (Taylor, 1985: 163), so we come to distinguish our true lived experience from the hegemonic discourses associated with ages and stages. The ultimate paradox, however, is that the Enlightenment tradition that has worked for hundreds of years to distance us from the Hag is also the system that can help us return to her.

Organization of the book: a guide for readers

The chapters of the book build on each other and all address the questions listed in this introduction. They can also be read in blocks, organized around particular themes, as described below.

Chapters 2 and 3 consider how a focus on class and gender respectively, illuminates the age regime in so far as they present parallel systems of hierarchical stratification and also work with and through age. We note that class, gender and age intersect in terms of the role they play in underpinning the current capitalist regime and indeed we demonstrate that the rhetoric of gender equality and age fluidity, no less than social mobility and meritocracy, are key to the governing project of late modernity. Chapters 4 and 5 critically examine the life course as a concept and practice, and the way ages and stages within them, and the age identities associated with each stage, are framed according to the developmental ideology of growth–stasis–decline. These chapters pose such questions as: What is the relationship between the fluidity of age norms, individualization and modes of inequality? How are intellectual disciplines themselves implicated in the naturalizing of inequality and how can we use their resources instead to view age and ageing through the life course in ways alternative to the dominant paradigms? Chapters 6, 7 and 8 return to the theme of the intersection of the age and gender regimes and examine: (i) norms of embodiment; and (ii) modes of sexuality, both of which establish hierarchies of masculinity over femininity at key ages as well as youth over age. New gender norms, involving complex new hybrids within these hierarchies may also; (iii) give rise to disorders or problematizations for women in particular, associated with clashing configurations and irreconcilable paradoxes. Chapters 9 and 10 explore representations of different age groups in a variety of media, from advertising to literature to policy rhetoric, noting that the defining perspective is always that of the dominant adult group and that one of the key conceptual vehicles for representing age groups and age relations – namely the concept of generations – emphasizes conflict as well as obscuring issues of class and gender. Chapter 11 explores ways of constructing authentic age identities (outside normative stereotypes) in individual biographical narratives using a combination of theoretical reflection and practical examples. Chapter 12 returns to the critical questions posed at the start of the book and suggests that it is the adult stage above all that, linchpin of the age system as it is, requires careful rethinking, particularly the role of work and the meaning of maturity.

A final note is that, in all of the above, in exploring the intersections between age and other inequalities, the book focuses particularly on gender and class, and again, for reasons of space, can only acknowledge, but not consistently include, the importance of other sources of inequality such as race, disability, sexuality and other characteristics. Indeed, and secondly, whilst not reducible to them, many of the disadvantages often attributed to race among other things can be explained with

reference to class and socio-economic disadvantage and it is on these that I will focus.⁸ In addition, women are discussed more than men, and femininity more than masculinity because the former are qualitatively more disadvantaged and disadvantageous in both the age and gender regimes. This will, however, generate insights of relevance more broadly: the ‘feminization’ of society works with two other closely related currents in society, namely infantilization and the generalization of tropes formerly associated with ageing subjects, in ways that are disempowering to all.

BOX 1.5

The Hag

The figure of the Hag is being employed in this book to symbolize the constitutive limit of the age system as it exists in the West. She epitomizes our view of ageing as decline and loss of self and our horror at the loss of choice and control that finds its ultimate expression in death. To the question that haunts us as we move through the life course, ‘How can I change whilst remaining myself?’ she seems to offer the terrifying answer: ‘You cannot’.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- This chapter sets out the terrain the book will cover. It begins with a discussion of the age system, its origins and embedding in layers of our social, material and intellectual world and identifies some methodological tools for the book’s inquiry.
- It then poses an analytic and critical task to be addressed over the course of the book.
- The analytic task will be to examine, over a range of themes central to both lived experience and sociological theorizing: (i) how age serves to introduce hierarchies in all these fields; and (ii) how sociological theories can best serve as tools in identifying and critiquing the age system.
- The critical task asks: (i) how do we imbue ages and stages with roles and meaning outside those associated with current hierarchies, dualisms and polarities? and (ii) how can we re-envision the meaning of old age and thereby undermine age ideology’s grip on our cultural imagination?

Further questions

1. How adequately has social theory approached the subject of age and ageing?
2. To what extent can we understand social attitudes towards old age as aspects of 'age ideology'?
3. How do views on age reflect approaches to freedom?

Talking point

The figure of the 'witch' has been consistently used in history to problematize certain older women who have characteristics that are described as 'unnatural'. In its sixteenth-century version, Charles Taylor suggests that the witch-burning craze allowed the expression of tensions resulting from the switch from a living to a dead cosmos. Throughout their long history, the witch trials predominantly targeted poor older women who were married but had no children – a theme that continues in today's culture, albeit in Disneyfied form, for example, in Roald Dahl's *The Witches* who detest children and seek to kill them all. Today, female political leaders or their professional wives such as Margaret Thatcher, Cherie Blair and Hillary Clinton have all been called witches: the term refers to different 'unnatural' qualities than in the above examples, but refuses to die. Consider some of its links with: (i) women's social roles; and (ii) the psychic dimension we have discussed in this chapter.

Key texts

The following texts provide a useful overview of the major themes covered in this book, including **age relations**, **age ideology** and some of the key challenges to the latter: Calasanti, T.M. and Slevin, K.F. (eds) *Age Matters: realigning feminist thinking*, London: Routledge; Dinnerstein, D. (1976) *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: sexual arrangements and human malaise*, New York: Harper & Row; Gullette, M.M. (1997) *Declining to Decline*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press; Gullette, M.M. (2004) *Aged by Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Mintz, S. (2015) *The Prime of Life: a history of modern adulthood*, Cambridge, MA: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press; Neiman, S. (2014) *Why Grow Up?* Harmondsworth: Penguin; Pilcher, R. (1995) *Age and Generation in Modern Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Woodward, K. (1991) *Ageing and its discontents: Freud and other fictions*, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

Notes

1. 'She who was once the beautiful helmet-maker's wife'.
2. I will be using the term 'Hag' rather than 'crone' in this chapter and throughout the book to refer to the old-woman figure. This is because I wish to stress thereby the connection between the old woman and women at earlier points of the life course. In this sense, the etymological meanings that include a female demon; an evil or frightening spirit; a nightmare; and an ugly or evil-looking woman and/or one who is intractable (Daly, 1991: 15) are all intensified in the figure of the old woman rather than appearing there anew.
3. I give these names a capital letter to emphasize the Mother/Feminine and the Masculine as principles or cognitive styles, equating to nurturance/passivity and activity, with their embodiment in actual men and women being a cultural not biological fact, as Susan Bordo (1986) also stresses.
4. From 'The Human Condition' originally published in Gunn, T. (1957) *The Sense of Movement*, London: Faber and Faber.
5. Penelope Leach identifies seven stages for the under-fives; similarly, versions of a frailty scale name seven major gradations (from very fit to severely frail) (see Leach, 1977, quoted in Hockey and James, 1993: 86; also Rockwood et al., 2005).
6. From Meyer, S. (2006) *New Moon*, New York: Little, Brown, pp. 3–6.
7. The US and the UK are the quintessential neoliberal states, a fact that is reflected in the degree of socio-economic equality, they are second and fourth in terms of wealth inequality worldwide; lower inequality is found in other European countries such as Sweden, where 1 per cent take 7 per cent of the GDP. Nevertheless, the trend throughout Europe is towards increasing inequality.
8. For example, Sean F. Reardon's work at Stanford indicates that the 'class gap' is now twice that of the 'race gap' see: <https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/reardon%20whither%20opportunity%20-%20chapter%205.pdf>