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Reviews

Chris Phillipson, *Reconstructing Old Age: New Agendas in Social Theory and Practice*. Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 1998, 161 pp. hbk, ISBN 0 8039 7988 6, pbk £14.99, ISBN 0 8039 7979 4.

Sixteen years after the publication of his influential book, *Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age* (1982), Chris Phillipson has gifted us with another stimulating, integrative book. In 1982 the 'political economy' approach to ageing was a fresh approach, signalled in Great Britain by Townsend's 'The structured dependency of the elderly: The creation of social policy in the twentieth century' and by Walker's 'Towards a political economy of old age', both published a year earlier in the first issue of this journal. The approach has gained strength and respectability, and in this, Phillipson has continued to be a major contributor. *Reconstructing Old Age* covers this ground and moves us forward, in a clear language that will appeal to anyone seriously interested in social theory and practice in the field of ageing. In so doing, he has moved from political economy to critical theory as his guiding theoretical approach, with a concern to understand the social and individual meanings of age.

The analysis is developed by first placing social ageing in a context of increased public awareness of a rapidly ageing society, concerns about the welfare state, and the changing nature of work and retirement. Phillipson describes this 'Crisis of social ageing' in an introductory chapter, and follows with three parts, each of three chapters. The first, 'Critical perspectives', develops his analytical tools. The second, 'Social change and social divisions' gives a chapter each to the social construction of retirement, financing old age, and generational relations. The third part turns to policy and practice issues.

Phillipson intends neither a text nor a policy statement, but rather to place debates about old age in terms of specific theoretical approaches and a depiction of social change. His challenge in Chapter 2 is to link self and society, and to do this he draws on theorists identified with the political economy approach in a Marxian or Weberian sense. But, whereas political economy sees social structures as humanly constructed, albeit assuming their own realities, Phillipson sees the key contribution of critical gerontology as its emphasis that individual lives are socially constructed.

Chapter 3 presents a fascinating historical account of the social construction of old age, focusing on the British case, in three institutional sectors: the 'biomedicalization' of old age; mandatory retirement as a marker separating off the working stage of the lifecourse from a newly created leisure stage; and the welfare state image of old people as dependents in a social contract framework of generational interdependence. Chapter 4 continues the history beyond the 1970s, to address the 'crisis' of growing old in a postmodern society. Phillipson argues that we currently lack the language and moral stance to

support and resource older people, as definitions of retirement and of the welfare state, which formerly buttressed ageing identities, have altered.

In Chapter 5, Phillipson makes good use of his extensive research contributions in the area of work and retirement. Changing patterns are linked to identity issues through the lifecourse perspective, as markers of the latter stages of the lifecourse are no longer fixed or certain. Governmental and corporate policy changes affect the timing of retirement and the nature of work, such that retirement no longer unambiguously signals the end of work.

Chapter 6 provides a brief historical overview of pension arrangements in the U.K. The so-called crisis of the welfare state is driven to a great extent by the fact that pensions account for its largest component. Yet, Phillipson shows, there is great variability, especially by gender, in income levels among older people, a large proportion of whom remain in or near poverty. With the 'collapse of work', and a polarisation between good and bad jobs, income differentiation is increasing even for those working; mounting reliance on private income resources for the retirement years threatens to increase these inequalities.

In Chapter 7, Phillipson addresses conflict between age groups or generations: a growing perception that old people pose a burden on the state, and a view by some that, in accepting resources, the older generations deprive the younger of a fair share of a nation's wealth. As a North American, I found Phillipson's historical approach to this issue useful. He traces the 'generational equity' issue in Britain back to a 1949 Royal Commission on Population, a period of dormancy of the idea, and then its revival in the 1970s and 1980s. Phillipson deepens the analysis of this issue by drawing on Mannheim's conceptualisation of generations, but fails to clearly distinguish static and dynamic views of generations. The latter, applied to generational conflict and equity considerations by people such as Thomson for Britain and New Zealand, and Kotlikoff for the USA, argues that, over their lifecourses, given cohorts differ in the ratio of their contributions to the receipts from the public purse. This is a much more sophisticated and dangerous argument than simply to say that one age group's current ratio differs from another's. Reviewing several arguments against both the static and processual positions, Phillipson adds new, cogent critiques, calls for rethinking the concept of dependency ratios, and urges that predictions about future resource allocation inequities should be tempered by a recognition that broad, global social and economic changes place into question much of the assumptive base of those arguing that there is substantial generational inequity.

Chapter 8 brings additional historical depth to the book, revisiting the issues in terms of distinct historical periods leading to the late modernity period in which ageing is moving from a collective to an individual experience, 'with the crisis of ageing seen to originate in how individuals rather than societies handle the demands associated with social ageing' (p. 119). Chapter 9 presents policy options to address the current crisis, and a very brief concluding chapter reviews the central arguments of the book, emphasising the need for a sociologically-framed critical gerontology.

Because the book covers so much ground, readers with specific interest in a given topic may find the treatment thin in parts. Despite his observation that

the neglect of gender is a critique of the political economy approach, gender issues are not richly explored in this book. Gender differences are noted, for example in labour force participation and in discussing economic security, but gender is treated as difference, not as process or social relations. Another disappointment is the book's relative inattention to health and health care issues including long-term care. In Canada and the United States at least, these are the issues, more than income security, that are bound up with policy concerns about the welfare state and civil society.

What of Phillipson's shift from political economy to critical sociology or critical gerontology? Perhaps a new identifier helps to mobilise intellectual energy; but many threads of this perspective – from action and meaning of individuals to the construction and reification of social structures, and the development of linkages between self and society, micro and macro, are quite consistent with Weberian and Marxian political economy theorising, and there is strong social psychology in Marx and, especially in the Weberian tradition. It is quite possible to see greater attention to gender, for example, or to the interplay between self and society, as natural developments of the political economy perspective. Phillipson's accomplishment in this book, however, is to present a broad approach to theorising while reminding the reader of the intellectual history of these theoretical concerns. What he chooses to call his approach is perhaps less important than the approach itself.

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University of North Carolina Institute on Aging and Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

VICTOR W. MARSHALL

Theodore R. Marmor and Philip R. De Jong (eds), *Ageing, Social Security and Affordability*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1998, 352 pp., hbk £45.00, ISBN 1 84014 817 9.

This collection of essays is the third in a series of international studies of issues in social security. It originates from a series of seminars held in Sweden between 1994 and 1996 to discuss the industrialised democracies' largest spending programmes, namely old age pensions and health care.

My approach to this review is not to evaluate the volume's contribution to social security scholarship as such; this will have been done in other places by academics who are well qualified to do so. Rather, I describe below its contents in order to flag up the relevance of its themes to social gerontology researchers. In terms of a critical appraisal the volume should be judged in its own right. It has no interest in older people as such; for example its examination of 'affordability' is from the perspective of political, social and economic systems not from the perspective of individual older people. In other words, this is a book about social security and comparative social policies, not a book about old age. Nevertheless, its themes are massive, interesting and in

some instances quite compelling and, as such, will be of interest to readers of this journal. All the countries examined face similar issues or, as many of its contributors would say, similar 'problems'. These include the greying of populations, globalisation and technological change, the inter-generational contract, economic and welfare restructuring and subsequent tensions between, on the one hand, governments trying to raise the retirement age and, on the other, employers trying to lower the age at which people leave the work force. However, countries differ widely of course in their historical, cultural, political and economic contexts and hence differ in their approach to social protection, as theorists like Titmuss so many many years ago and Esping-Andersen (1990), much more recently, have argued.

The balance of essays varies; some are very technical and quite densely written, and some are theoretical and/or fairly controversial for the general reader. Most of the contributors draw their ideas from the discipline of economics but a number engage with concepts from political science, population studies and other disciplines. There are two, rather minor limitations, to the book. First, possibly because of translation issues, it is not a very 'easy read' and secondly, because of publication lead times, the empirical data employed in the book relate to the early 1990s. For instance, the essays comparing Western welfare systems with those of the Far East are now probably less valid as a consequence of the downturn in Asian economies.

The first section of the essays deals with general issues to do with social welfare. Schulte, for example, asks whether there will, in the future, be a convergence of guaranteed minimum income schemes in the European Union if only to limit 'social tourism' *i.e.* migration to countries with generous welfare provision. Rein and Wadnsjo focus on the notion of the changing welfare mix. They predict a major cross-cultural shift in welfare societies. Increasingly, occupational and personal funding of retirement income is becoming more prominent than governments' social security programmes.

Part two of the volume contains six articles on pension reform. A number of different themes and approaches are pursued but central to nearly all the papers is the relative merits of pay-as-you-go and funded pension schemes. Most Western countries and the ex-communist regimes have or have had pay-as-you go schemes which are creaking at the seams. There is now an interest in further privatisation of retirement provision through mandatory saving schemes.

The third section of the volume concerns itself with health care insurance. Van de Ven looks at the Netherlands' recent attempt to introduce market reforms into the Dutch health care system whilst still maintaining principles of universal access to care. Other contributions here include an examination of the alleged disintegrating health care system in Poland, and an argument for governments to limit their role in long-term care to its financing through voucher systems.

The last section of the book is titled 'health life expectancy'. It consists of two statistical papers which model the impact of predicted disability and frailty on the future of modern welfare states. They both, in rather different ways, show that governments have panicked and exaggerated the cost implications of disabled and older societies.

The volume is an important compendium of themes to do with social security systems in ageing societies. I hope it stimulates social gerontologists to carry out cross-cultural and cross-country research on pensions and paying for care from the perspective of older people.

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The Centre for Housing Policy,
University of York,
York.

CHRISTINE OLDMAN

Alice H. De Boer, *Housing and Care for Older People: a Macro-Micro Perspective*, Netherlands Geographical Studies 254, Faculteit Ruimtelijke Weternschappen, University of Utrecht, Utrecht, Netherlands, 1999, 198 pp., Dfl 42, ISBN 9 068 09275 8.

The Netherlands is known for the high proportion of its older population who live in institutional accommodation. By the standards of northern European countries, it was late in adopting cost-limitation and retrenchment policies, which in the early 1990s were implemented assertively. The overall aims have been to improve the matching of needs to provision and to restrain cost growth; the measures are described collectively as 'substitution' (equivalent to targeting) of budgets and people from nursing to residential care, from the latter to domiciliary professional support, and from that to informal care. The policies have been pursued through privatisation, decentralisation from central to local government, and 'horizontal displacement' – the shift of budgets among Ministries and agencies, often on incorrect assumptions about how both agencies and clients will respond.

This original, ambitious and stimulating study of housing and care policies for older people in the Netherlands begins with impressive critical expositions of the problems: to match older people's needs and capacities to a range of accommodation and support options, to resolve the choices made by individuals with public expenditure constraints, and to balance efficient delivery with respect for the quality of individuals' lives, including their attachment to their homes. It analyses the mismatches between older people's needs and the types of accommodation they occupy, critically analyses the policy and practice changes, and integrates new evidence about individual residential strategies and decision making with the requirements of a spectrum of housing-care options.

The author, from the Netherlands Institute of Public Health and the Environment, has researched these issues for a decade. Her book, based on doctoral research and a comparative European study, includes chapters on historical and international perspectives (concentrating on England, Denmark and Germany), and separate analyses of the factors associated with: moves to more supported housing, the delivery of home care in the Netherlands and England, and local variability in supply and its association with patterns of

usage. The findings and interpretations can only be sampled: the author demonstrates well that the tight matching of needs to housing-care packages through rigorous eligibility criteria implies *either* frequent moves between more and less intensive options, which produce a counter-productive level of relocation stress and much frustration of people's wishes (some people act in anticipation of future health problems and want to move to accommodation which provides support that they do not then but later may need), *or* a level of responsiveness to changing needs in the delivery of domiciliary services which is never achieved.

Among the results of the policies, many residential homes have been converted to independent housing and some to nursing homes, there has been a shift towards 'special-needs' housing, financed through exceptionally high individual housing benefits, other budgets have spiralled and, as elsewhere in northern Europe, low intensity support programmes have contracted while high intensity support has increased. Younger old people with care and support needs appear to have been systematically disadvantaged by these changes. The end of the 'substitution' policy is now in sight, for the Dutch government declared in 1998 that 'a further reduction of capacity in homes for the elderly was undesirable in view of the [level of need for care]'.

For gerontologists interested in the integration of housing, social, and nursing home services, who are stimulated by international comparisons, and who wish to promote systems of care that are consistent with older people's housing wishes and decisions, this integration of policy analysis, macrosocial theory, and multiple empirical analyses brims with evidence and ideas. Its flaws are minor – understandably the English expression is occasionally wooden, and the thesis shows through in the unselective presentation of regression results – but they are more than compensated for by the high production standards (except that there is no index) and the quality and originality of the work. For specialists and for students it will be found a rich resource.

Centre for Ageing and Rehabilitation Studies TONY WARNES
University of Sheffield

Raymond T. Coward and John A. Krout (eds), *Aging in Rural Settings: Life Circumstances & Distinctive Features*, Springer Publishing Company, New York, 1998, 320 pp., $49.95 hbk., ISBN 0 8261 9720 5.

More than half of the world's older people live in rural areas. Most research on ageing has been conducted in urban areas. In recognition of this, the First International Conference on Rural Aging will take place in 2000, organised by the Center on Aging at the University of West Virginia and sponsored by the United Nations, the World Health Organisation and the International Association of Gerontology. In the USA, approximately one in four older people lives in a rural area. There is a well-developed academic tradition of rural sociology, particularly in the more rural states. The editors of this volume have established reputations in rural gerontology, having both

published earlier books on the topic. In this volume they have joined forces to put together a team of authors they considered to be experts in specific relevant areas of rural gerontology to produce a distillation of current knowledge on rural ageing. Their stated purpose is to provide a '… comprehensive overview of what is known about rural elders in a number of topical areas' (p. 12).

The title 'Aging in Rural Settings', however, promises a wider treatment of the subject than it delivers, since it covers only the US. Having said that, the volume presents an excellent overview of that subject, reviewing the literature to date, summarising findings, discussing seemingly contradictory findings, summarising the state of the art, highlighting areas where further research might be targeted and providing a broader framework for the future development of rural gerontology. While focusing on research and findings from the United States, the book has much to offer readers with an interest in other geographical areas. Many of the findings are comparable with other western countries and the differences or gaps in comparable data raise further hypotheses.

In two introductory chapters the scene is set for the three main sections of the book which cover: (1) life conditions, (2) diversity, and (3) services and social policy. The first chapter notes that in rural sociology, gerontology has remained peripheral and that gerontologists have not typically examined the impact of community/environment on the life experiences of older people. They stress the importance of environment but note that much that is written about rural areas is based on myth rather than empirical data. They suggest that those who age in rural areas are subject to double jeopardy. The second chapter deals with the demographics of rural ageing, stressing the importance of recognising the range of different types of rural areas, comparisons between urban and rural areas and the need for locally based data on which to base health and social care services, noting that needs are related to demographic factors. Both these general introductory chapters offer much to reflect on irrespective of the reader's regional interest.

The sections on life conditions and diversity of rural older adults provide reviews of the existing US literature. They cover economic status and work, physical and mental health status, community and integration, family relations, gender, race, poverty, migration and longevity. As someone who has spent the last 20 years working in the area of rural ageing in the UK, I have been increasingly aware of the fact that much of what we think we know about rural ageing in developed western countries has been generalised from North American literature. After reading these chapters, I want to urge caution in this regard. Findings differ within the US and differences I had earlier identified as between the US and the UK turned out to be spurious on the basis of further American investigation. For example, rural health is not poorer than urban health when age, gender and income are controlled for, and life expectancy may be higher.

Readers in countries with state welfare systems may anticipate that the final section on services and policy would have little to offer. However, these chapters identify both service and research needs in rural areas and make policy recommendations worthy of consideration. They note, 'In a political

environment where costs are the major consideration driving policy agendas, equally serious considerations about people and communities can easily get lost' (p. 283). The overall message here is that older adults in rural areas deserve equity with those in urban areas.

Despite its US focus, this book is an important contribution to the literature and an excellent starting place for academics, students, policy makers and practitioners with concerns in rural areas. I share with the editors both the concern that older people in rural settings have been largely overlooked by social scientists and also the importance of direct comparisons with urban populations. My main disappointment with the book is its misleading title. While rural-urban comparisons will be important in future research, caution is urged in generalising from the findings summarised here. We need comparative rural data from other western countries. This book provides a welcome framework on which to base such comparative research.

University of Wales,
Bangor, Gwynedd, UK

G. CLARE WENGER

Richard Schulz, George Maddox and M. Powell Lawton (eds), *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics Volume 18, 1998*, Springer Publishing Co., New York, 1999, 349 pp., hbk $54.00, ISBN 0 8261 6501 X.

The *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics* is always a volume I wait for with anticipation. The 1998 volume focusing on interventions research with older adults is not a disappointment. The editors have brought together a number of substantive reviews from an impressive range of contributors. However, to some extent the *Annual Review* is an anachronism as we approach the millenium, being a product of the early 1980s. In the age of computerised searching and the era of *Cochrane Reviews* these contributions may appear quite dated. It is important for the reader to recognise that the reviews will not therefore be cutting edge; the time from writing to publication probably militates against this. They do, however, provide an excellent overview of the historical and theoretical basis of many interventions with older adults. Perhaps the other minor quibble about this series is the dominance of medicine and the medical model in the scope of topics discussed. With one or two exceptions, reviews in this volume focus on traditional approaches of geriatric medicine and give insufficient attention to the economic, psychological and sociological factors which affect the development, delivery and evaluation of interventions.

The contents of this volume can be broadly divided into two kinds. First there are reviews of interventions which focus on traditional medically-defined problems of later life: depression, insomnia, memory, incontinence and behaviour in nursing homes. They appear to be scholarly contributions but, as a social gerontologist, I am unable to judge the quality of these reviews in terms of coverage or interpretation. Reviews of this kind are published regularly in academic and professional journals and a number are the subject of *Cochrane Reviews* which are available on the internet. I wonder how the

reviews included in this volume compare with those more widely available? Putting these concerns to one side, it is relevant to say that each of these subjects are put in a historical context and some indication of the theoretical basis of the interventions described is included.

The other type of review included in this volume is more appealing to the social gerontologist. There is an excellent review by McAuley and Katua of interventions to promote physical activity among older adults. Although still somewhat from the medical perspective, it does highlight the psycho-social impact of increased physical activity. Perhaps absent from this review is an understanding of the social barriers to physical activity among older adults including aspects of the social environment, older adults' attitudes and beliefs about exercise, as well as the ubiquitous social stereotypes of later life held by older adults. The review by Gitlin provides a rare analysis of the evaluation of home modifications used to enhance the physical and social environments of the 'differently abled' older adult. A complementary review not included, is one that specifically examines adaptation to the wider community environment, although the contribution by Marmor and Okma on societal interventions affecting older adults, touches on the wider physical environment. This last review stands out from the rest because it takes a more social gerontological perspective by focusing on the impact of income maintenance, housing and the broader impact of public policy. Few of the issues discussed in this contribution will be new to the readers of the journal but, from the perspective of the likely readership of the Annual Review, this is a well-judged contribution.

This volume is a useful read. Its value to the average reader of the journal is likely to be in sensitising them to the state of knowledge within geriatric medicine. The historical and theoretical orientation, the critical review of study designs and the scholarly approach of all contributions and the avoidance of taken-for-granted medical knowledge, makes these contributions accessible to social gerontologists and non-medical practitioners. The volumes will be useful in undergraduate teaching for health professionals. It is unlikely, however, to be a resource used by many of the experts in geriatric medicine.

Centre for Health Services Research,
University of Newcastle upon Tyne

JOHN BOND

Mary Stimming and Maureen Stimming, *Before Their Time, Adult Children's Experiences of Parental Suicide*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1999, 192 pp, $18.95 pbk, ISBN 1-56639-655-7.

This book was written as 'a source of comfort' to adult children who have experienced the death by suicide of one of their parents. It includes a collection of first-hand accounts of those with such experience, put together by the two authors, whose own mother committed suicide. Their individual accounts are included in the book along with those of their two brothers. Other accounts are by people who were contacted through Suicide Survivor groups throughout the United States of America.

The authors aimed to collect accounts from a 'diverse demographic

population' but, interestingly, they do not mention either class or ethnicity. They did find that initially only women responded to their first requests for contributions, and they had to make further, more strenuous efforts, to encourage men to participate in the book. Finally, some of the men who did agree to participate, chose to be interviewed rather than write their own first hand accounts.

This book is about a very painful and important topic. As the authors rightly claim, suicide is still often a taboo subject and those who have been bereaved in this way may often be very reluctant to talk about what has happened. The strength of this book lies in the centrality it offers to survivors' first hand accounts and thus space for them to talk about their feelings and experiences. For that reason I found it hard at first to work out why I felt so disappointed in the book.

A clue lies in the preface where the authors acknowledge that they chose to limit or exclude 'graphic accounts of how the deceased took his or her life'. They go on to explain that this was done to respect the privacy of the dead person and not offend other members of the family. Those are clearly very important considerations. Yet, I would make two comments. First, if these are meant to be first-hand accounts by those who have survived suicide, then surely that decision should be theirs. If necessary authors could have chosen to remain anonymous to protect others.

Second, when someone dies it is often important for those left behind to talk about the actual details of that person's illness and death. How much more important might that then be for those bereaved by suicide, especially when that suicide may have been completely unexpected or carried out in a violent way? In those situations, survivors may desperately seek to make sense of what has happened by going through the details of a death again and again. The manner of a person's death will often lead to a reconsideration of a life – who and what they were. How then can details of a death be so simply excluded? It is as though the heart of the book has been taken out.

My father committed suicide when I was 32. I know that one of the most helpful things people could do for me at the time was to allow me to talk about exactly what happened. The most painful was when it was obvious people wanted me to shut up, as they couldn't cope.

The difficulty with this book is that these accounts often not only do not tell us what happened when the parent committed suicide, except in very broad terms, they also tell us very little about them at all. Most of the accounts are of the survivors' feelings and, finally for me, they all seemed to blur into one, with a blandness that made one account hard to differentiate from another. The exception to this was that by Christopher Stimming of his mother's death: 'It's the Story of a Lovely Lady'. As he, briefly, paints a clear picture of his mother and the depression that preceded her death for many years, his own feelings and experience of her death are thrown into sharper relief and in that way have so much more to offer.

I hesitated to make these criticisms of this book and I am aware that many people may feel accounts of a death should be omitted. Yet I read again the beautiful piece by Matt Seaton at the end of his part autobiographical book, about the illness and death of his wife, Ruth Picardie (Picardie 1998). Ruth

Picardie died of cancer, not suicide, yet I think this is a helpful comparison. He writes in detail about her illness, its symptoms and finally her death. He is candid about how the cancer affected her life and relationships with others, including himself. He paints a vivid portrait of her final months and thus gives real meaning to his own feelings and experiences. I have read this chapter again and again and each time seem to find some new insight into the feelings of someone bereaved in such a way.

Finally, I think if I had to recommend a helpful book for adult children bereaved by suicide I would choose *A Special Scar* (Wertheimer 1991). This book is based on 50 survivor interviews, carried out by the author. Its drawback is that the author does not offer first-hand accounts, and often there is too little quoted from the interviews, which leads to a frustrated feeling of wanting to hear more.

But Wertheimer is not afraid to tackle difficult subjects like the details of suicide, under what circumstances the body was found and by whom, how the family coped with the suicide, what the inquest was like, how other people reacted. The book contains other accounts than that of parental suicide, for example that of a sibling or teenage child, but has helpful insights to offer for all those bereaved in this way.

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St. John's Hospice
London

SUZY CROFT

Françoise Bouchayer and Alain Rozenkier (eds), *Technological Developments, the Dynamics of Age, and Ageing of the Population: Progress Report*, MIRE Rencontres et Recherches, Paris, 1999, 176 pp., ISBN 2-11-091236-7.

This collection of papers reports on the progress of French research on the link between technological developments and ageing. The research forms part of a publicly-funded joint venture between MIRE (La Mission de Recherche et Expérimentation) and the CNAV (Caisse Nationale d'Assurance Vieillesse). Eight completed projects from France concerning the interface between ageing and technological progress are reported here. The main theme of the book is that technology does not take sufficient account of social factors, and that this 'missing link' in technological progress applies particularly to the needs of an ageing population. Most of the research projects contain original data, and are concerned with the mismatch between the design of new technology and the use (or lack of use) of the end product – and there is no shortage of examples. All the research presented provides a clear message that for an everyday device to serve a purpose, it must both meet a need and be

easy to use. The problem is that, for many disabled older people, the reverse is often the case.

The extent to which new technology either meets a real need or misses the mark altogether is much in evidence throughout the book. Ghislaine Gallenga provides a good example in her research on the introduction of a new ticketing system for public transport in Marseille. Instead of a ticket, customers (no longer 'passengers') are issued with plastic cards that are useable for a certain number of hours of travel. The cards need to be validated in machines before travelling on buses, the underground or trams. What Gallenga found was that not only was the scheme totally incomprehensible for many older users but, in addition, these passengers were alienated from staff who, when they could be found, treated the older customer's difficulties as irksome and time-consuming. Stéphane Juguet and Stéphane Chevrier found similar problems in their research on the underground train systems of Lille and Toulouse, where the notions of 'perpetual motion' and constant flows of passengers that were integral to the design of the system, literally left older people standing. In a similar vein, Jean-Claude Sperandio *et al*. in their research among visually impaired older people found that many everyday objects, such as video recorders or cashpoint cards, are underused because of the smallness of the key functioning parts.

The practical problems encountered in the application of these new technologies to everyday situations are explained throughout the book in terms of their sociological implications. Thus, as the editors rightly point out, technological innovations touch upon all forms of social life, yet we know little about their precise effects and consequences. Family and intergenerational relations for example, are highly influenced by new technologies and Vincent Caradec provides a useful discussion on the sociology of everyday objects and the impact that new technologies can have upon family relationships. In this respect, those objects at the cutting edge of technological development, such as the Internet and mobile phones, have a noticeable effect on the way generations within the family interact and communicate.

It is surprising to find though that, despite the many design errors of the 20th century, the same mistakes continue to be made. This process is amply described by Serge Clement *et al*. in their research concerning the high tech pretensions of a 'multi-sensor system', whereby a surveillance system of residents in integrated homes checks for 'abnormal' behaviour. We are again reminded how removed designers can be from basic housing needs. Fortunately, such a system failed to be implemented on this particular housing estate although, worryingly, the designers are still continuing to search for a social application of their new technology. Time and again it seems that the aim of new technology is simply to reduce the need for social interaction when its true worth lies surely in the ability to complement human resources.

In those instances where innovations prove to be of general use to all age groups, it is not unusual to find evidence of the misconceived or even ageist attitudes in their initial design. Thus Danièle Weiller provides an interesting account of how the marketing strategies of commercial firms (who have recently been allowed to compete for previously state or voluntary controlled helpline services) unquestionably targeted the elderly population only to find

that a much wider general applicability of this form of service exists. One is reminded of a similar marketing error (not reported here), whereby the Renault car manufacturers targeted young adults on the launch of their Twingo series whereas its practical design features in fact suited older customers.

At times the text suffers from the over use of jargon and one cannot help but think that this is a small irony given the subject matter. Words such as 'social logics' and 'anthropo-logics' failed to get past the spell checker and could not be found in any dictionary either. It is difficult to know whether this tendency stems from translation problems, from the fast-changing field of technological developments and our sociological understanding of them, or to a different, continental-style approach to sociological problems. Notwithstanding this aspect of the book, readers interested in this fast-changing and increasingly important field will find a richness of data here. Moreover, it forms part of a programme that has yet to be completed (details of ongoing projects are given in the latter part of the book). The programme should also be commended for making its results available in English, thereby facilitating international comparisons to be made.

CNAV,
Paris

JIM OGG

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