

the authors have produced a much needed analysis of old age and welfare provision in one of the world's most rapidly ageing societies. The book will be of great interest to researchers interested in comparative welfare regimes, ageing and social policy in Asia, critical gerontology, and the social construction of ageing.

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doi:10.1017/S0144686X06005861

John A. Vincent, Chris R. Phillipson and Murna Downs (eds), *The Futures of Old Age*, Sage in association with the British Society of Gerontology, London, 2006, 272 pp., pbk £19.99, ISBN 1412901081.

Predictions and prognostications about the future are often heady stuff, whether they are laden with gloom or optimism about wealth, science, technology and opportunity in tomorrow's world. This book has some of that, but is not of course an *Old Moore's Almanac*. Why was it written? It is obviously important to think about and predict possible futures, perhaps mainly for three reasons: policy and public services must think ahead and prepare for future needs; the next generation of older people need all the help they can get in preparing for their futures; and researchers need to think about what to investigate now if they are to produce useful baseline data for the future. Strangely none of these aims emerges very prominently in this book. The authors are cautious and careful, and in many ways it is a parochial though often scholarly book, with relatively little taken from the prognostications or projections of scholars whose focus is something other than old age. Much of the book summarises how things are or were, with little emphasis on why we need to consider possible futures, that is, very little in the way of an address to service planners or policy makers, or even to the researchers of the future's present. The book is multi-authored, mainly by stalwarts of the British Society of Gerontology, sociologists or other social scientists. The 21 chapters are all short and the topics range widely over all the expected subjects: health, self and beliefs; family and work; housing and migration; gender and ethnicity; income and inequality. Of the 31 authors, 24 work at UK universities, six in the USA and one is an independent researcher.

Envisaging the future has to be based on trend projections, or a theoretical framework, or on logical or reasonable supposition – or perhaps pure speculation (if there is such a thing). That is why writing about the future is hugely challenging. One must use the present on which to base one's argument; so all these chapters start from a description of the current situation. If one is familiar with this material this is unnecessary (and even somewhat boring). But if one is new to the topic much more detail is needed. So this is not a book I would recommend to new students of social gerontology (they should go first to the more typical textbook). But there is an important and fascinating theme running through the chapters, about whether life in old age will be better or worse in 30 or 40 years' time. Among the authors are both optimists and pessimists. Although it is invidious to simplify their positions, Bengtson and Putney for example can be picked out as optimists: they think that 'a viable social contract between

generations will remain a characteristic of human society in the future' (p. 21), and that the family will remain strong and supportive. Similarly Arber, writing about gender issues, says that 'in the future there is likely to be greater recognition and acceptance that close emotional and sexual relationships are important for both older women and men' (p. 57). Some are guardedly optimistic. For instance, Victor, in her chapter on health, states that disability in later life may be decreasing in the developed countries and there may be further overall improvements in both mortality and morbidity. Some take few risks with their predictions, thus Bond and Corner, considering wellbeing, say that 'life over the next 30 to 40 years will be at least as complex as it is now, with a diversity of everyday life experience' (p. 158). On some topics there is more pessimism: social inequality in old age is likely to remain, the prospects for pensions are a cause for concern, tolerance of disability may remain low. This leads to some exhortation rather than pure analysis: Ginn and Price think we must halt the decline in the proportion of pension income provided by the state; Downs says we must create more positive public understanding of dementia. There is also some interesting debate about the nature of the future and how it may be studied, and a recognition – as the title denotes – that there are many possible futures for all of us. Time will tell.

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doi:10.1017/S0144686X06005873

Jason L. Powell, *Social Theory and Aging*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland, 2005, 157 pp., pbk \$16.95, ISBN 0 7425 1954 6.

As most sociologists of ageing soon discover, there is very little attention to later life in the mainstream of the discipline and particularly in social theory. Sociology courses and textbooks examine the various lines of fracture and stratification thrown up by social class, gender, race and sexual orientation, but are sketchy about the implications of old age or ageing. Accounting for the retired or for older people is often an afterthought or over-generalisation. In part this is a consequence of the era in which the founding figures of sociology, Marx, Durkheim and Weber were writing, but it is also a reflection of the concerns and lives of contemporary practitioners. That this oversight needs correcting is becoming more and more obvious, as the most prosperous societies age and the nature of later life is transformed from a residual category defined by various forms of lack into a positively anticipated post-work life stage. The capacity of social theory to help us understand these changes as well as to benefit from the insights provided needs to be at the core of any sociology of ageing.

Jason Powell's book might have helped us to begin this task, given that it explicitly attempts to combine social theory and ageing. The range of material covered promises much. Not only are conventional social gerontological approaches, such as the political economy of ageing covered, but we are also provided with expositions of the work of Foucault, Giddens and Beck. Unfortunately, the book fails either to make sense of the nature of contemporary social theory or