

Book Review / Compte rendu

Susan Pickard. *Age Studies: A Sociological Examination of How We Age and Are Aged through the Life Course*. London, ENG: Sage, 2016

Reviewed by Stephen Katz, Trent University – Department of Sociology and Trent Centre for Aging and Society
doi:10.1017/S0714980818000296

In *Age Studies*, sociologist Susan Pickard has produced an important and timely conversation about the cultural, political, and scientific ideologies that shape us as subjects of age. With a focus in the United Kingdom, she joins other critical gerontologists with an emphasis on class and gender inequalities in the making of the modern life course. We learn how accepted models of human development have been naturalized in ways that diminish their social contexts. Thus, “age studies” means both the history of the study of age and how we might go about studying it differently. This dual meaning resonates throughout the book’s 12 chapters as each establishes the critical issues embedded within particular life stages and then addresses alternative strategies for change. Chapter 2 is about enduring class-based advantages and disadvantages and the consequences of lifelong cycles of education, work, risk, and poverty for retirement and longevity. Chapter 3 similarly examines the gender gaps and constraints that merge patriarchal and age regimes to produce earlier and harsher forms of marginalization, devaluation, and insecurity for women who also bear the disproportionate burdens of domestic labour.

One of the book’s original contributions is the introduction in Chapter 3 of the “new”, “go”, or “can-do” girl, a figure that represents both a challenge to traditional patriarchy, with girls being more successfully educated, self-empowering, articulate, adaptable, and entrepreneurial (compared to boys), and conformance to neoliberal individualist and feminine ideals. According to Pickard, the contradictions of the new girl expose the wider problem in age and life-course studies of reconciling critiques of regimented age-stage identities and narratives of decline with newer “third age” and baby boomer identities that blur and redefine traditional chronological boundaries with promises of liberating later life. As Pickard says, “we can be committed to seeking out greater equality and freedom, while being alert to the ‘cunning’ of history, or the new nexuses of power/knowledge that mix new freedoms with new oppressions” (p. 63).

In chapters 4 and 5 about life-course identities, the oscillation between freedoms and oppressions marks transitions of growth and maturity. For children and “youth”

whose social roles have become less definitive, their life-course precarity and instability have also grown. In mid-life, when crises around work, security, productivity, and family emerge, so do looser and diverse meanings about “growing up” prevail. For women, myths of beauty and female frailty, and the pathologization of menopause have riddled healthy maturity with coercive age-defying regimes around body weight, diet, and fitness, along with alarming rates of addiction, depression, eating disorders, chronic fatigue, and self-harm for younger women. Given the unrealistic characterizations of early and mid-life for both women and men, the risks of failure, decline, frailty, and loss become all the more symbolically and morally threatening in later life and old age.

These contradictions are carried forward in chapters 6-9, with each respectively focusing on embodiment, sexuality, health, and popular culture. As in all the book’s chapters, in these Pickard has added useful educational guides with bullet-point chapter summaries, key questions, talking points, key text references, and further resources. She also offers chapter conclusions that challenge the oppressions and inequalities built into the life course, suggesting, for example, that our age-based identities are more fluid, hybrid, and relational than we are led to believe. In chapter 9, Pickard looks to Judith Butler’s work on performance and parody to “unseat” the images and meanings attached to life-course expectations and produce different and provocative representations that lie outside the age system. Chapter 10 examines the cultural shifts behind the age-blaming politics of generational “justice” campaigns and the myth of a resource war between young and old. Here Pickard reminds us that generations are best understood in relation to each other and within broader contexts of family, gender, labour, and care, where we all experience the effects of a “de-responsibilized capitalism” (p. 206). Chapters 11 and 12 conclude the book by sharpening discussion about resistance and the value of our own experiences, metaphors, stories, and reflexive capacities to lessen our fears of aging and appreciate its paradoxes, while offering young people more positive and confident life-course trajectories. Our critical task to re-imagine the life course also includes death and dying.

Pickard has organized *Age Studies* to go beyond scientific fields to consider the social, historical, literary, and cultural dimensions of the life course. Rather than follow the current literature that mimics life-course stages with textual divisions on “childhood”, “adolescence”, “mid-life” and “old age”, she prefers to scatter these stages across her chapters in order to illuminate their discourses and social constructions. However, this dynamic strategy can create a dilemma for the reader. On the one hand, several of the book’s ideas and critiques are repeated in multiple chapters; for example, the discussions of the new girl, menopause, and gender and education. On the other hand, the book hosts such a dense gathering of theories and schools of thought stemming from feminism, post-structuralism, discourse analysis, risk sociology, literary

criticism, philosophy, governmentality, and political economy that some appear and disappear after brief introductions. The effect for the reader can be one of intellectual vertigo, following some ideas repeatedly while losing the trail of others at the same time. Thus, although Pickard impresses with a tremendous interdisciplinary scholarly background, we remain unsure of what constitutes her own particular theoretical model, except that such a model may ultimately be realized through the development of an “authentic” age consciousness. This is a tantalizing goal, intimated by Pickard’s selection of writers in chapter 11 who have rejected their imposed otherness for being old, but in the end, we are left with further questions to ponder as to what this state of consciousness would be like and how we would identify its authenticity.