Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age

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Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age

Chris Phillipson

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To Jane

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University of Keele
December 1981

CHRIS PHILLIPSON

Editor's Introduction

The fact that in capitalist society people are valued primarily in economic terms is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than by an examination of social policy towards the elderly. In recent years the term 'ageism' has been invented to identify a wide range of social practices which discriminate against people on account of their old age, from institutional policies and activities which abuse and harm the elderly to typically 'ageist' remarks which dismiss, belittle and insult them. The study of ageism as a social phenomenon in a wide range of societies is an important development which deserves widespread support on the Left. It is necessary, however, for such studies to be firmly located structurally so that individual practices and experiences can be understood in relation to wider economic and ideological forces. In *Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age* Chris Phillipson undertakes this precise task and so makes an important contribution to the study of ageism in the welfare state as well as extend, in very significant ways, the general Marxist analysis of social policy to which this series of Critical Texts in Social Work and the Welfare State is committed.

Although we can identify elements of oppression and discrimination against the elderly in many contemporary and past societies, when we consider our own society we must first be able to identify precisely the social relations and the accompanying ideologies which support and legitimate such oppression and discrimination. So far as social policy in relation to the elderly is concerned, we can see at once that what is significant is that people generally are evaluated in relation to their accumulation of capital, their current labour power (if the market requires it) or their ability to reproduce labour

power, and that therefore those without wealth who are outside both production and reproduction (the elderly and the severely handicapped) are most likely to fare badly so far as welfare provision is concerned. Thus the treatment of the elderly is mediated by the facts of class and gender; in particular, wealthy, ruling-class elderly are highly favoured and often retain substantial power over other people's lives as well as their own, in marked contrast to the working-class elderly, especially women.

But being dismissed as of no account or being actively discriminated against is not an experience of the working-class elderly for which the Right is solely to blame. On the Left, too, patronising and dismissive attitudes and practices have been quite evident. It would be comforting to excuse such aberrations as simply reflecting elements of dominant ideology from which socialists have not yet struggled free; it must be admitted, however, that both the economism of earlier Marxist theory and practice and the emphasis on social reproduction which is more characteristic of present-day socialist feminism have at times the effect of *marginalising* the elderly. Emphasis on the revolutionary potential of, first, producers (male industrial proletarians), and then reproducers (women engaged in the task of family socialisation) has inevitably reinforced the position of the elderly as largely *redundant* as agents of radical change.

So far as the state is concerned, ideological justification for the discrimination and neglect of the working-class elderly is a tricky matter. The stigma which attaches to the elderly poor is not as public as that which, for example, attaches to black youths or single-parent mothers, and so it cannot be used so easily to fragment the working class and thus obtain support for policies directed against the elderly. The elderly poor are 'deserving' so they can be patronised, neglected, but not openly attacked. But there is a range of justifications available to support our responses to old age and these deserve very close examination. Perhaps the most important of these ideological supports is *biological reductionism*, whereby the real physiological and biological changes which take place with ageing are often utilised as a justification for denying old people the right to participate in decisions which affect

them and generally to control their own lives. To emphasise, as Chris Phillipson does, the *social construction* of ageing is not to deny the facts of physical ageing, but to point to the difficulty of deciding precisely where the boundary lies and to note the way in which the latter is used to justify the former. *Psychological explanations*, of every level of sophistication and simplicity, are similarly available to account for the way the elderly poor are treated. Thus the necessary material and physical dependency of many elderly people is interpreted as 'child-like' and used to justify treating them as if they *were* children. Furthermore, infantilising the elderly eventually produces its own predicted result — old people may be induced to accept a 'child-like' role as the only legitimate way in our society of being physically dependent upon another person.

Certain *social justifications* are also available to support, in effect, policies of neglect and discrimination directed to the elderly. It is suggested, for example, that old people want to disconnect themselves from the world, to retreat from life in preparation for death. In so far as some old people wish to 'disengage' (and there is much dispute about this) we must ask ourselves to what extent this is a socially constructed disengagement from a set of social relations experienced predominantly as stigmatising and neglectful. Certainly, we must be aware of the extent to which 'disengagement theory' and other explanations of the social phenomenon of ageing are used to suggest that the elderly have only limited, simple and even subsistence needs (especially if they are very elderly working-class women) and that therefore only minimum welfare provision is necessary.

Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age shows us how minimum much of this welfare provision is. From an analysis of the major structural elements in the social construction of ageing we are able to see the very concept of 'retirement' in a clear historical context. Phillipson demonstrates, with great sensitivity coupled with an ability to draw on telling empirical material, how old age is experienced among the working class in particular and how that experience differs as between women and men. The ideological construction of old age is seen as directly reflected in a range of welfare policies and

practices, including the ways in which the elderly are responded to by doctors and social workers. But Phillipson does not fall into the trap of fatalism in the face of the massive forces which are ranged against the elderly poor: on the contrary, this is a combative book which goes on to show that the elderly have a collective role in the struggle for their own liberation from neglect, stigma and oppression. It is a struggle to which the Left should give sustained support.

University of Warwick
December 1981

PETER LEONARD