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Book Review

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As the global population continues to age and the anti-aging markets increasingly focus on expanding longevity, the book *Age As Disease* brings to attention the complex interplay of biopolitics and neoliberalism in the Global North. In this book, cultural studies scholar David-Jack Fletcher develops the concept “gerontological hygiene” to analyze the nexus in and around aging. The six chapters both contextualize and criticize the rapidly evolving neo-eugenic regimes that have been altering the contemporary processes of aging. The complex navigation of oneself in old-age is here explored through the lens of “somatechnics,” defined as a “symbiotic relationship between technology and the body” (22). This relationship is analyzed in the book, using the Foucauldian concepts of biopolitics and governmentality. Overall, this work aims to meaningfully analyze the ways in which older adults and new technologies intersect. Building on this analysis, the author productively challenges the existing welfare policies for older adults. Additionally, this book aims to re-imagine what the future holds for the human population in the post-human era.

Chapter 1 expands on the biomedical model of age(ing) which configures older bodies as “deficit...as a form of disease-state” (3). In the process, Fletcher points towards the complete ignorance of social and environmental factors, particularly in physiological and psychological models of aging. This reductionism, he believes, is embedded within the nexus of biopolitical and governmental regimes that only focus on “successful” and “productive aging” (Rowe and Kahn 1997). This rhetoric about active, self-reliant individuals that strive to overcome the inevitability of frailty in aging by curing old age has become common in medical and scientific circles in the US, UK, and Australia. To bring the social aspects of aging back into hegemonic ideologies of aging, the author proposes to follow the “Life Course Approach” (popularly used among Dannefer and Kelly-Moore 2009) that acknowledges how both “genetics and agency operate together to produce an individual’s life trajectory and opportunities for living well” (6). The author advances psychological and social scientific approaches to acknowledge the impact of social, economic, environmental and life course factors that are disregarded or neutralized in a contemporary neoliberal understanding of aging that prefigures all older adults to be essentially self-reliant and self-governing individuals. Independent and active older adults then become part of the cultural category of the “third age” (successful aging) while older individuals who are in need of support, comprise the “fourth age” (failed aging). These categories are complemented by different neo-eugenic, biopolitical and sovereign regimes. Following Foucault’s concept of governmentality, these cultural imaginaries are internalized as socio-cultural expectations and norms which are in turn further reproduced through everyday bodily and social practices.

The biopolitics of somatechnics, based on the theoretical foundations by Michel Foucault (1963), is further elaborated upon in Chapter 2. Fletcher draws from Foucault's work to analyze "how the imbrication of biopolitics and regimes of normativity discursively constructs aging as a disease needing to be cured" (38). Biopolitics, as Foucault argues, regulates the relationship between technologies and the body. Simultaneously, these biopolitical regimes exercise power that might result into "disruptions, counter-actualizations, destabilizations and the creation of new selves, affinities, kinship relations and cultural possibilities" (22). Fletcher here gives the example of *Trinfinity8*, a rejuvenation technology that uses algorithmic codes to help the user attain a state of physical and emotional health, and new lifestyle changes like caloric restrictions or intermittent fasting, to demonstrate the contemporary fusion between New Age spiritualism and technology. This introduces the readers to discursive underpinnings of the new technologies where the idea of anti-aging has become central to government policies and everyday governance. Moreover, by providing a brief history of longevity and rejuvenation technics, the author shows how eugenics and biopolitics have always been intertwined. The resulting re-enforced hygiene regimes have always aimed at abolition of age(ing), as in case of nursing homes or old age homes which have been transformed as sites of medicalized quarantine and constant surveillance.

Chapter 3 discusses "gerontological hygiene" as an important principle in the perpetuation of a neo-eugenic paradigm that disenfranchises older bodies and renders them as frail and diseased. The author explores this phenomenon through an archaeological approach, discussing the origins of gerontology as a discipline. Furthermore, he uses the case-study of the Regis Nursing Home franchise (<https://www.regis.com.au/>), the largest provider of aged care in Australia, to exemplify how a series of economic, technological, and biomedical discourses target, codify, and regulate older adults. These homes, as stated, could be private or public residential facilities providing long-term care, producing older bodies as frail and dependent individuals who are in constant need of support. Institutionalized care further marks the contemporary bifurcation in aging by differentiating retirement homes and vacation resorts, that are more characteristic of Third Age, from hospice facilities that are seen as end-of-life care and reinforce the Fourth Age as a grim cultural imaginary. How this bifurcation in aging intersects with other social differentials like class, gender, and context(s) remains unaddressed in this book.

Chapter 4 questions the very category of 'the human' in the politics of aging. The author abides and builds upon the humanist philosophy of Heidegger, Arendt, and Derrida and Levinasian ethics to elaborate on which bodies are made more acceptable than others. In Heidegger's conception of the human, the human species is superior to animals because of their cognition and language. A similar hierarchy is installed for prisoners and older adults who are seen as individuals without autonomy in comparison to 'full' human beings. Fletcher not only finds this unethical but also observes how this categorizes older adults as unproductive beings of our societies.

Chapter 5 questions the ethicality of medical research and scrutinizes both human and animal experimentation in relation to somatechnics. Drawing from Levinas' notion of the "same" and the "other," Fletcher reminds that the latter continues to be irreducible through violent acts of exploitation. The author uses the examples of xenotransplantation – such as the blending of animal testicles within a human body (238)– and quack medicines to show how de-humanization takes place through denial of rights, voice and consent and leads to questioning of the very category of humans. Similarly, Fletcher argues, older adults are by default assumed to be incapable and their 'unable' bodies commodified through anti-aging technology and medicines. Additionally, informal conglomerates like the GeroScience Network and therapeutic research which contribute towards anti-aging movement(s) are here critiqued for their dehumanizing effects. The last few sections of this chapter tap into posthuman

theory and remind that, as anti-aging technologies remain uncontested, they are likely to perpetuate the idea of humans to become an “ageless cyborg” (290)

Chapter 6 concludes with an overview of the major arguments and interconnections in the book and tries to answer the question of whether the evolution towards agelessness should continue or old age should be abolished altogether? According to Fletcher, as much as this question is interesting, it is more essential to know the concrete effects of anti-aging somatechnics which impact policies of aging. At the same time, new technologies also bring possibilities for new corporeal forms and new subjectivities that are counterhegemonic, like the possibility of the creation of humankind as an “ageless cyborg” (290).

To conclude, although this work belongs to the broader field of cultural studies; it quite often intersects with popular assumptions of cultural gerontology and offers invaluable insights into the socio-cultural dimensions of aging. In the process, the reader is provided with a range of contemporary cultural theories that have critically examined aging. The book is a difficult read in terms of the esoteric connections made across disciplines, theories, and scholars. As a reader, more cultural examples could have made the text more accessible. Nonetheless, the book is well-researched and presented in a very detailed manner along with leaving readers working in the area of cultural studies, gerontology, demography and more generally in social science, with some pivotal questions to ponder on.

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