The aim of this chapter is to set cultural gerontology within the context of the broader ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences. Although there were earlier precursors who wrote about the importance of cultural processes for the study of social signification and distinction, such as Clifford Geertz, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, the cultural turn became more evident during the 1990s with the growing interest in the ideas of post-structuralism and post-modernism as sociological rather than aesthetic or literary phenomena. The work of Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens became leading theoretical reference points for European sociology during this period (Outhwaite 2009). Their writings exemplified a new approach focusing on themes of contingency, individualization and reflexivity in social analysis. Despite areas of difference, these writers agreed that a fundamental change was taking place in the organization of modern society, a change that undermined the certainties of the modern nation-state. The outcomes generated by this change were to be found in increasing fluidity, indeterminacy and reflexivity in the formation and exercise of social identities and individual lifestyles. Identity became an important issue, but significantly it could no longer be seen to map unproblematically onto the distinct socio-economic categories established in the previous phase of modernity. All that once had seemed solid about the institutions of modernity was now in flux.

Although each of the above sociologists emphasized different aspects and different vectors of what could be described as ‘post-modern’ change, they broadly agreed on presaging it on: (a) the transformation of national economies from a basis on industrial capital and mass production to a basis on mass consumption; (b) cultural and economic globalization; (c) the disembedding influences of the market and the media; and (d) new social movements. The latter, particularly, stimulated new academic disciplines subsumed under the rubric of ‘cultural studies’. In contrast to the emphasis on social class, deviance and status in the mainstream social sciences, cultural studies drew attention to the ‘covert’ positionalities and subjectivities of variously gendered, racialized, sexualized and disabled bodies. Socially, culturally and academically, greater attention was paid to the body as a source of identity and expression of lifestyle. These embodied identities were viewed through the critical prisms of power and performativity. Rather than accepting as ‘natural’ the corporeal binaries of gender, race, sexuality and able-bodiedness, the contingency and fluidity of ‘embodied’ signification was explored through gender and women’s studies, studies of race and ethnicity, of sex and sexuality and through disability studies. While
Initially focusing on youthful bodies, these new fields of academic inquiry began to impact on the study of age and ageing (Gilleard and Higgs 2013). Such ‘thinking through the body’ has caused similar questions to be raised about age and ageing as were asked about sex and gender, ethnicity and race, impairment and disability. The hegemony of the ‘youth versus age’ paradigm that previously dominated gerontological thinking in the twentieth century is beginning to be challenged as the social identity of old age fragments.

Perhaps the first impetus for re-examining ageing ‘through the body’ was provided by women’s studies. A number of feminist gerontologists began to argue that it was no longer satisfactory to speak about ageing as if it were a reified phenomenon unrelated to particular individual bodies embodying particular identities. Such questioning first began in articles published in the 1970s and 1980s (Sontag 1972, Olson 1988), but turning a thoroughly gendered lens on ageing was primarily a phenomenon of the 1990s (Venn, Davidson and Arber 2011: 72–3). This was most strongly highlighted when, in 1993, a special issue of the *Journal of Aging Studies* was published devoted to the new ‘feminist’ gerontology. In reviewing what was being realized in this issue, Beth Hess made clear that the papers assembled enabled gender at last to be treated as a phenomenon of ‘the social relations of age’ and not simply the product of individual differences in ageing (Hess 1993: 196). Coming from outside the sphere of ageing studies, cultural sociologists such as Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth were also beginning to extend their interest in the body and consumer society to the concerns of those with ageing bodies (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991). Remarkably, this chapter appeared in one of the first edited collections on the sociology of the body (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991), something that many subsequent collections in this growing subfield have failed to pursue.

Both perspectives have helped re-direct the study of age and ageing toward the adoption of a more explicitly cultural approach, while at the same time drawing attention to age’s embodied nature. The cultural sociology of consumerism and the sociology of gender have independently helped to open the door to other ways of examining age and ageing beyond the chronological traditions of gerontology. Subsequently, not only gender but race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability have been used to re-examine previously unquestioned assumptions about ageing and later life. Age is now being seen through the lens of ‘inter-sectionality’, the cross-disciplinary arena that sees social phenomena through the lenses of the multiple identities and positions that destabilize and render contingent dominant interpretations of later life. In a similar fashion, cultural sociology has encouraged the positioning of older people not as happy or unhappy, healthy or unhealthy, fit or frail individuals but as agentic, contradictory and potentially desiring subjects who are both implicated in and contributors to contemporary culture and the individualized, consumerist ‘project of the self’ (Giddens 1991). These perspectives have encouraged social science researchers to go out and explore changing patterns of consumption, time use and leisure activities as well as investigate ‘body work’, ‘self-care’ and other lifestyle practices in later life.

**Consumption, culture and the politics of post-modernity**

Instead of the word ‘post-modernity’, sociologists such as Bauman, Beck and Giddens chose other terms, such as ‘post-traditional or reflexive modernity’ (Giddens 1991), ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman 2000: 2005), ‘second’ modernity or even ‘after’ modernity (Beck 1999, Beck and Grande 2010), to describe the social, economic and cultural arrangements of present-day society. Despite the differing nomenclature, they have each contributed to the creation of a language in which the changed nature of society could be discussed. Beck wrote about a first (classical, industrial) modernity and a second (reflexive, post-industrial) modernity. The latter he delineated through the five inter-linked processes of globalization, individualization, gender
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revolutions, underemployment and global risk (Beck 1999: 2). The simultaneous operation of these five processes has undermined the solid structures of the modern world of the nation-state. While much of Beck’s work around the idea of ‘risk society’ was concerned with institutionalization of ‘individualization’ within specific societies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001), he also paid attention to the effects of globalization and the limitations of the nation-state. ‘Globality’, as he termed it, represents the expansion and ever greater density of international trade, the revolution in information and communications technology, universal demands for human rights, and a post-national polycentric world politics ‘where transcultural conflicts are enacted in one and the same place’ (Beck 2000: 11–12). The nation-state and the institutions through which it operates no longer have the dominating influence they had during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Beck and Lau 2005).

For Bauman, much as Beck’s second modernity had replaced first modernity, a new ‘liquid’ modernity had replaced the older ‘solid’ modernity. Like Beck, he viewed this new liquid form as an ‘individualized, privatized version of modernity’ where ‘the burden of pattern weaving and the responsibility for failure fall[s] primarily on the individual’s shoulders’ (Bauman 2000: 8). The transformation of solid into liquid modernity is also seen by Bauman as a consequence of the impact of individualization, as well as resulting from changes in the ordering of time and space, along with the replacement of stable with fluid communities, changes to the nature of work and the shift from building future structures to the playing of games (Bauman 2000: 138). Equally, an emphasis on ‘emancipation’, which he describes as ‘the need for self-determination’, has played a role in transforming social reality. In a later work, he summarized this transformation as a shift from a society of producers to a society of consumers. In liquid modernity, he argues, the ‘consumerist syndrome’ determines ‘virtually all the parts of the social setting and of the actions they evoke’ (Bauman 2005: 83).

For Giddens, who was writing before either Beck or Bauman had fully formulated their approaches, the transition is less about consumerism and more about a shift toward a new ‘life politics’ at the centre of which lies ‘the reflexive project of the self’ (Giddens 1991: 237). In life politics, social conflicts are as much over meanings as they are over resources—particularly the struggle to free oneself from the oppressiveness of ascribed identities and assigned communities. But, as Giddens noted, such struggles are fraught with conflicts. They risk diverting attention, and concern, away from those without the material resources to realize their ‘self-project’ to those with the means to do so, while increasing opportunities for the market to commodify individuals’ life choices and lifestyles (Giddens 1991: 196–200). Giddens particularly addressed the shift in the ‘referentiality’ of the lifespan, which he viewed as an important consequence of the ‘disembedding’ of tradition. He concluded that as a consequence ‘the lifespan becomes more and more freed from externalities associated with pre-established ties to other individuals and groups’ and that, ‘lacking the external referents supplied by others, the lifespan again emerges as a trajectory which relates above all to the individual’s projects and plans’ (Giddens 1991: 147). Specifically discussing later life, Giddens sees that ‘old age at 65 is a creation, pure and simple, of the welfare state’, whereby ‘ageing is treated as “external,” as something that happens to one not as a phenomenon actively constructed and negotiated’ (Giddens 1994: 170). Instead, he suggests, there is a need for ‘a politics of second chances’ that offers opportunities for rethinking and repositioning later life (Giddens 1994: 172).

Three themes unite these three theorists. Each saw the transition or change in the nature of modernity less as a purely structural one and more as one over-determined by culture, and with this went the superseding of production-based collective approaches by individualized consumer ‘mentalities’. Previous habits and collective traditions framed by the institutions of the workplace and the state were transformed by the profusion of choice provided by the market operating...
alongside an increasing reflexivity that celebrated individual choice and the exercise of personal agency. All three implicated the power of globalization in facilitating this change, through both the expansion of the global market for goods and services and the limiting of the discretionary powers of the nation-state. For these canonical theorists there has been an acceptance that the nation-state could no longer serve as the principal determining influence organizing individual life courses. In various ways their work combines to argue for the institutionalization of individualization, the necessity for continual reflexivity and the ever present valorization of choice, with all the intended and unintended consequences that such ‘emancipation’ might bring throughout the life course.

Liquid ageing: the destandardization of the life course

If, as Giddens has suggested, new opportunities—second chances—are being realized to age differently in second modernity, what might the main influences on this ‘destandardization’ of later life be? Drawing on the theoretical writings of Bauman, Beck and Giddens, we have previously postulated that these ‘opportunities’ have arisen through several inter-related ‘vectors’ of change that have characterized post-war Western society. Foremost among these has been the expansion of mass consumerism, alongside the rise of new social movements associated with the cultural ferment of the 1960s, the changing social geography of life and the changing nature of work and retirement (Gilleard and Higgs 2005, 2011a).

A mass consumer society emerged in a number of Western countries during the decades after the Second World War. Those initially most affected by and most involved in the expanding markets for consumerist goods and services were younger adults, but as these young adults grew older they remained major consumers (Higgs et al. 2009). Not only did the numbers and ages of consumers grow, but so too did the arenas in which consumerism was realizable. Fashion for all ages jostled with cosmetics and cosmetic surgery for all ages (Twigg 2013). The disposable income of people over 60 has grown at a rate either matching or, more often, exceeding that of people of ‘working age’ since the 1980s (Wolf, Zacharias and Masterson 2012). Despite the financial crisis of the early twenty-first century, the proportions of pensioners in the UK in each of the five income quintiles is now broadly similar to that of the general population (Department of Work and Pensions 2013). Similar changes can be found across most Western societies, evincing the novelty that ‘older persons constitute an increasing consumer group with […] significant aggregate purchasing power’ (UNECE 2009: 1).

Young adults were imbricated in the cultural transformation of the post-war era as much through the new social movements that emerged in or shortly after the 1960s as through their rising discretionary income. United under the slogan that the ‘personal was political’, the women’s liberation, the black civil rights and the gay liberation movements asserted the voices of groups of people who previously had suffered varying degrees of cultural, economic and social marginalization within ‘modern’ societies that had traditionally valorized the position of the white, male, middle aged, heterosexual breadwinner. Equality of access to the main institutions of society—of the state, the workplace and the market—was legislated to enable increasing degrees of inclusion for people embodied by ‘difference’. In a similar fashion to participation in consumer culture, although these ‘life politics’ affected younger adults first, the subsequent ageing of these youth sub-cultures saw issues of identity and lifestyle extend across the life course into mid- and later life (Gilleard and Higgs 2011b, Hodkinson 2013).

Changing social geographies have also contributed to changing the place of age in society. The communities of place built up during the course of what Beck has termed ‘first modernity’ have given way to the new communities of identity and interest (Gilleard and Higgs
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Social communication relies less on ‘the propinquity of neighbourhoods’ and more on access to information and communication technology (ICT). The ‘network’ society described so extensively by Castells (1996) has removed the dependency of social interaction on physical proximity. It has established new patterns of inter-relatedness that obfuscate time and place and in so doing break down some of the ‘rhythmicity’ of life and the life course. As Castells (1996: 446) noted, ‘[w]hile old age was once considered a homogenous last stage of life […] dominated by “social death” it is now a highly diverse universe’ fostered by the development of the new network society.

Several developments illustrate this trend. First is the growth in ‘senior citizen’ tourism, in retiree seasonal migration and in transnational home ownership and home rentals, particularly by late life couples. Second is the growth in older people’s use of mobile (cell) phones, of the Internet and of Internet-enabled telecommunications (such as Skype) and social media. Third is the growth among the older population in participation in various interest-based ‘outdoor’ pursuits ranging from sporting activities (such as the rise of master athletes) to cultural events (such as the growth of ‘retro-concerts’ and ‘book clubs’ or ‘reading groups’) to educational activities (such as universities of the Third Age). There are no doubt many more examples—facilitated by greater disposable incomes, by developments in domestic ICT and by active state policies directed toward improving access (such as subsidizing the costs of travel for senior citizens). While it is true that those at both ends of the life cycle remain more dependent on the resources of their neighbourhood than those in the middle, network society’s potential for freeing individuals from the limits of ‘communities of propinquity’ increasingly impacts on all stages and ages in the ‘post-modern’ life course.

Finally there is work. If the life course of first modernity was based on the standardized working life of a white heterosexually partnered male employed in industrial labour, in second modernity no such singular model can prevail. The middle class white collar worker may be an aspirational figure but his pervasiveness is as much under threat as was the fate of the previously ubiquitous blue collar post-holder. Gender divisions have been reduced while sexual identities have become diversified. Working lives have shrunk (at both ends) and overt racialized segregation has diminished as the nature of the place of work has been transformed. The result is a mixture of individual emancipatory gains and collective social losses. In the United States, the corporate (or work-based) welfare system is fast becoming a memory, alongside some selective forgetting of its exclusionary practices. Work-based collective pension schemes are declining, particularly in the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ economies. Even within the welfare states of continental Europe a guaranteed job and a guaranteed retirement age and income are under considerable threat. The ‘three pillar’ pension model espoused by the World Bank, comprising a poverty-prevention state pension, an income-stabilizing occupational pension and an additional flexible income return from a private pension, seems increasingly unachievable for the majority of workers, with ‘[p]ension reforms in many countries […] result[ing] in more choice and risk to individuals’ (Gough and Niza 2011: 97). The future of retirement is less certain as the outcome of pension reforms grows steadily more opaque (Grech 2013).

Despite the growing uncertainties surrounding the source and amount of income in later life, the risk of becoming impoverished in later life has been attenuated. Declining rates of poverty in later life, evident since the 1980s, show no sign of being reversed in the twenty-first century (Figari, Matsaganis and Sutherland 2011, Grech 2013, Zaidi 2009, 2010). As the division between working and non-working life again begins to blur and as individuals are increasingly expected to shoulder the responsibility for ensuring an adequate income throughout their entire adult lives, the reading off of retirement from previous occupation becomes ever more contingent and open to alternative meanings. In short, class framed in terms of labour market position
seems to matter less in understanding contemporary later lifestyles—even as later life inequalities increase. Lifecycles are not what they once were, and later lifestyles even less so.

The cultural turn in ageing studies: opportunities and risks

The rise of consumer society has witnessed position and status transformed into lifestyle. Cultural and consumer practices have moved to centre stage. This is the case at most if not all points in the life course, including later life. The cultural turn both reflects and reinforces the fracturing of a ‘modern’ discipline (gerontology) and of a ‘modern’ social group (the old). In place of the traditional dualism of chronology and corporeality, later life is now being examined through alternative lenses, through consumption and lifestyle, technologies of the self and the life politics of identity. While these themes have stimulated much interesting and innovative research, both empirical and theoretical, the cultural turn has not been short of its critics. Within mainstream sociology, Will Atkinson has castigated Bauman, Beck and Giddens for preferring ‘the shifting sands of rhetoric [to] the firm foundations of observed reality’ (Atkinson 2010: 32). ‘Whatever the age and no matter the occupational position’, he argues, ‘the firm grip of class[... has been shown to remain unbroken’ (Atkinson 2010: 32). Whatever the class, one might equally add, the firm grip of age has likewise remained unbroken. The anti-culturalist argument persists: that society remains structured by age, sex and class, and that understanding age without reference to the biology of ageing and the class structure of society is misguided, perverse or simply superficial.

International social survey research does not support such a structuralist analysis. Neither age nor class feature as salient sources of identity for over two-thirds of the population of Western societies (Hyde and Jones 2013: 83). For people no longer part of the labour force, no longer directly engaged with the social relations of production, it might be thought that property ownership could stand as a proxy for ‘class’. But the division between a property-owning and a property-less class changed remarkably over the course of the last century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the aged working poor were unable to own anything beyond the clothes on their back; by its end, home ownership was the ‘norm’ for people of retirement age, in France, in the United Kingdom and in the United States. While there are continuing debates about the usefulness of the term ‘class’ in contemporary sociology, the structures of class characterizing ‘first’ modernity no longer seem so stable nor so determining (Higgs and Formosa 2013). Instead we have inequality and diversity in later life, equally unjust but in different guises to the inequalities structured by twentieth century colonialism and industrial capitalism.

Conclusion

Foucault’s ‘late work’ can serve as an important point of reference in charting these changing times. Although his earlier work was preoccupied by the nature of knowledge and power, he became more interested in ideas of ‘governmentality’ and ‘self-care’ later in his life. These themes are of particular relevance to cultural gerontology. In his later writing, he began to examine what he called ‘practices of freedom’, reframing power as ‘strategic games between liberties’, with technologies of governance mediating between these games and the particular states of domination that apply at any point in time or place (Foucault 1994: 19). Age and ageing can be seen as sites for these kinds of ‘strategic games’, whether played out between corporeality and embodiment, or between states and markets, or between communities and individuals. Cultural gerontology we would argue should place these kinds of strategic games at the centre of its concerns—exploring the various struggles such as that between asserting and ignoring
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chronological age; between privileging and de-emphasizing ageing over able-bodiedness, sexual identity, gender or race; between an ageing that is shaped by the market and one that is shaped by the state. At the same time it is important that cultural gerontology recognizes the contingencies and temporalities that determine the individual outcomes of these struggles. There is no more a final resolution for the place of age in society than there is any final resolution of the power age exercises over individuals’ lives. But by exploring these struggles, cultural gerontology can only enrich our understanding of the present and possible cultures of ageing. Such struggles involve continually transforming and re-organizing issues of selfhood, citizenship and embodiment, struggles that extend over what Deleuze and Guattari (2004) called a thousand plateaus of inscription and re-inscription. The present handbook offers a glimpse of these plateaus, and will hopefully encourage others to explore and challenge them as they emerge.

References

Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs