Historical scholarship can offer a contextual grounding for the recurrent sociological, anthropological, political and economic questions arising from the contingent and ambivalent meanings of ageing. Yet, while ageing studies have been providing a timely evaluation of contemporary trends in ageing, the history of ageing has, until recently, still been grappling with Simone de Beauvoir’s contention in her seminal 1972 book *Coming of Age* that there is more to the meaning and conceptualizations of old age than is found in mere statistical facts. Old age needs to be seen as a process, a last stage of life and a change of one’s own life (Beauvoir 1972). In the twenty-first century, historical studies have come broadly to embrace cultural approaches to the history of old age, evidenced in a growing range of articles and surveys on old age in Western history (for example, Johnson and Thane 1998, Troyansky 1996, Laslett 1984, Ehmer 2008, Blessing 2010). The vexed relation between the historian’s tool-kit (in the form of source material) and the way in which we interpret and weigh the meaning of old age, however, still dominates historical approaches to ageing: ‘But if there is no language, no discourse, no text, and no possibility of direct anthropological observation, then there can be no historical construction’ (Johnson 1998: 17), writes historian Paul Johnson on the intricacy of approaching the history of age(ing) from a post-modern perspective. As this chapter illustrates, however, historians have found ways of historical construction.

The chapter discusses the benefits and limitations of the ‘cultural turn’ within historical approaches to ageing. In order to make sense of the vastness of historical scholarship on age, the chapter makes an eclectic choice of the literature, discussing modern Western historiography with an emphasis mainly on Anglo-American and Continental literature. The chapter is organized in three, interrelated parts. The first outlines the predominant demographic strands in the historiography of ageing. The second discusses the shift in emphasis due to the arrival of cultural history. The third offers a short excursus into the way in which medical history has recently taken a further material turn. Lastly, the chapter concludes with some suggestions concerning the future shape of scholarship.

**Demographic strands**

Early social gerontologists turned to history in an effort to help their cause of studying older people in their own right. Social gerontology, emerging as a sub-field in the 1950s, used
demographic and population studies, life expectancy ratios and mortality and fertility rates to launch a decisive condemnation of the negative impact of modernization on older people. A rich and still dominant strand of socio-demographic historical scholarship on ageing has similarly focussed on the issue of generations, families, work life, insurance patterns, socio-politics and mortality changes of old age (for example, Achenbaum 1995, Bourdelais 1998). This prioritized a focus on employment, household authority and ownership.

At the centre of these studies has been the interpretation of the outcome of modernization for older people. Modernization, which was interpreted as the process of change from traditional and local social structures to a state-driven, centralized apparatus that took over care of social groups, was identified as coming with a mixed bag of private/public visibility and benefits, and being beneficial or deleterious for older people’s lives: Post-industrial societies were characterized by a substantial rise in the presence and public visibility of the aged in the community due to changing demographic features, such as low fertility rates and increased life expectancy. At the same time, social dilemmas concomitant with this rise increased the need to provide adequate health care, securing social, economic status and governmental responsibility for the well-being of the older people. The early studies have argued the case for a golden age for old people in the past, now lost in modern society that brought a weakening of family bonds and carried in its wake medicalization and isolation of older people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (for example, Stearns 1980, Laslett 1984). Modernization thus became the culprit for increasing decrepitude of the old by destabilizing support structures and diminishing the higher social status that older people once had (Burgess 1960). George Minois’s *History of Old Age*, hailed as one of the first major studies of the ways in which old age has been perceived in Western culture throughout history, and a grand narrative of literature and representations, can be read as falling into the tradition of a lost golden past (Minois 1989). This interpretation has been criticized (as will be discussed below) but continues to influence historical research (and a large body of gerontological and sociological literature).

**Cultural history**

*Cultural history I: mentalities*

Wishing to focus on the lives of ordinary people, social historians have approached the history of old age through attitudes, sentiments, everyday life, family structures and life course perspectives. Within an increasingly critical attitude to older interpretations and broad stereotypes based mainly on demographic data (for example, Hendricks 1982), historians such as Margaret Pelling and Richard Smith have pointed out that while ageing was highly visible, it was also hidden, in that it remained a very private experience (Pelling and Smith 1991). Thus the historical focus shifted from structural approaches to ones that detailed the diversity of daily life. These revisionist approaches have questioned the ‘golden age’ theory. They replaced it with what they argued was a fuller or more complex history of old age, which considered the provision of policy and care, and focussed on change within family structures and private networks (for example, see Ottaway 2004, Thane 2003). Categorization based on solely chronological age was seen to limit understanding of the varying experience of ageing. Jaber Gubrium (2005) highlighted the importance of detailed research into the lives of older people at the micro level. Decisive also has been Thompson, Itzin and Abendstern’s (1990) study that argued against social gerontology’s tendency to focus on the problems of old age. Instead, they insisted, we should look at the enriching, positive and non-devaluated experiences of old age in the past, basing their accounts on autobiographies and life stories recorded in the 1970s.
The shift in the historiography of age(ing) has thus come with the introduction of cultural history approaches that have opened up the social constructionist view, with enquiries into the impact of mentalities, images, narratives and metaphors. Moving from the detailed description of the metaphors and pre-eminent representation of, for example, ageing pyramids and/or other classic arts and literary subjects (for example, Hazan 1994), a whole range of sub-fields, such as gender studies, social science and technology studies, media and literary studies, have called for rethinking norms and difference within the ageing discourse itself and within historiography (for example, Guille 2004, Soland 2001, Moreira and Palladino 2011, Kampf, Marshall and Petersen 2012). Thomas Cole’s by now classic cultural approach to historical gerontology, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Ageing in America* (1992), used literature and art to detail the transition from fundamental questions about ageing to scientific theories. There is now a boom in literary studies in gerontology and historical examination re-considering cultural values, definitions of old age and the limitations and ambiguities of old age, thereby offering gerontology a humanist interpretation (Achenbaum 1995). Studies examining the popular impact of representation of ageing have identified the role of the media in making visible such shifts in societal mood (Streubel 2011).

**Cultural history II: minorities**

Much of what drove historians to ask different questions was influenced by the minority studies of the 1970s, which highlighted the complexities of human life. Treating older people as a homogeneous group, the argument went, disregarded important factors of inequality in society, notably the impact of race, class and gender. Class and race, however, important factors in the social history of minorities and a growing issue within social gerontologist writings of old age, remain understudied in historical scholarship (for an exception on class, see, for example, Susan-nah Ottaway’s work on the eighteenth century, 2004).

Gender has been given greater prominence as a theme in social history. In the history of ageing, however, though it has featured as a sub-theme, it has not been in the forefront of analysis. Much scholarship has focussed on men, though without specifically identifying them as subjects of inquiry, and often to the exclusion of women. ‘Where Are the Women in the History of Ageing?’ asked Marjorie Chary Feinson back in 1985, berating most women’s historians’ ignorance of older women (Feinson 1985: 1). At first sight this absence might come as a surprise. Was it not the aim of women’s studies to unravel social and cultural differences, and the vexed relation between nature and culture, with its conceptions of normality and pathology (of female bodies)? These themes are equally vital for the history of old age. Some scholars have explained this apparent scholarly blindness towards ageing women as the result of continuing ageism that underlay historians’ neglect of older women. Feminist historians have argued that the absence of women within the historiography of ageing has been due not only to the fact that much of the then visible public power was granted to men while denied to women: they have also highlighted that historians’ views were narrowed by such prevalent power structures—their theories of ageing were based on models of ageing that did not account for the experiences of older women (for example, Haber 1985). Lastly, the absence of gender in historical research on ageing has also been identified as resulting from a problem of scant sources on ageing women. Researchers have had to embrace alternative approaches to sources, and ask new questions. Such studies have been influential in expanding quantities approaches that treat old age as an obvious category defined by chronological age by highlighting the specificity of individual ageing.

The concept of identity, which has been a vital part of the mentalities approach in history, has only recently received attention in the scholarship investigating minority elder groups.
Important works by social scientists and literary critics (for example, Calasanti and Slevin 2006, Woodward 1999) have only slowly filtered into historical research. These recent studies illustrate the positive side of female ageing, looking for example at the social networks of older women that gain them status. One of the first collections specifically on ageing and women in history was Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane’s *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500* (2001), in which individual social and life course perspectives were presented. There now exists a growing body of historical studies of ageing women; literature addressing the subject of male ageing identity as historical process is just emerging (Hofer 2007, Watkins 2008, Kampf 2009).

Why, then, is there such continuous predominance of quantities approaches to the history of ageing and such a slow introduction of differential markers such as gender, race and class? David Troyansky has argued that this problem has emerged due to the division of socio/political and cultural approaches in history (1996: 21). Paul Johnson has similarly criticized the lack of connection between social and cultural historians that has limited the interpretation of the history of old age (Johnson 1998): on the one hand, social historians’ interests focussed on social experience studied under the categories of family and related status viewed as part of a macro view on social, economic and political structures; on the other hand, cultural historians’ interests focussed on the epistemology of the term ‘age’ and the social construction of ageing. To bridge both approaches, gender, race and class could work as possible categorical links between social and cultural histories of ageing since they are important characteristics of personal identity, of social construction and of societal and political making (see also Rogers 1999: 55).

**Cultural history III: materiality**

Reflecting the influence of work on gendered bodies, recent historical scholarship has turned to the field of materiality and to issues of embodiment. The lateness of this interest by historians of old age in ‘bodies’—which has been an established field within general history—is unsurprising. Social gerontologists had evaded debates about materiality since the introduction in the late 1960s of the concept of ageism, which saw a focus on biology as retrogressive and potentially degrading. Similar arguments were made in women’s history with regard to a focus on the female body. Literary critic Margaret Gullette has, however, argued for the need to research difference, and she blamed researchers who themselves suffered from gerontophobia, and from the fear of confronting their own ageing (Gullette 2004). This argument could also be applied to the failure to recognize the material aspects of age, thereby ignoring important issues such as ageing identity and the socio-cultural dimensions of the ageing body. However, there is an increasing trend to (re)evaluate ‘materiality’ in the historical experience of old age. Social sciences have already started to do this, and the approach has spread to studies in medical history investigating medicine as cultural practices in relation to older people.

Most promising for future research has been the current interest in the ways in which embodiment and the materiality of bodies intersect culturally with biological and chronological changes. This can be seen in work that has explored the role of science and technology in the constitution of age (Katz 1996, Ballenger 2006, Moreira and Palladino 2011). Studies have also looked at the interface of gender, ageing bodies, modern medicine and the reshaping of medical expertise (Katz 1997, Watkins 2008, Kampf, Marshall and Petersen 2012). Some scholars have revisited the medicalization theory, arguing for a more nuanced picture, for example, pointing to the ways the disciplines of geriatrics and gerontology themselves represent minorities within the larger medical field (Haber 2004: 516).

Despite this new work, the older person in history remains a somewhat shadowy presence. Most of the work in medical history focusses on expert knowledge and constitution of
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These studies also explore the way gerontology has developed as a field of knowledge and its relation to mainstream medicine (Achenbaum 1995). This focus, however, alerts us to the fact that we know very little historically of the experience of ageing from the perspective of the older people themselves. Medical history is only now beginning to turn its attention to everyday life (for example, Moses 2007). This development offers a potential bridge between social structural and cultural approaches to the field.

The historian’s tool-kit and the history of old age

There are two major interrelated issues impacting on the benefits and limits of the cultural turn of historical approaches to ageing: these are sources and their interpretations. Sources are the Achilles’ heel of any historical contextualization of ageing. Of course, this problem is not confined to historical work in relation to age: there are other groups that historians have had to work hard to recover (for example, children as seen from their own perspectives). But this does not make the issue of sources for historians of old age any easier. There is only limited information from the past on the views of older people themselves. There is also controversy over what kind of sources are reliable indicators of how older people lived and experienced their lives. From a social historical perspective, evaluating the standing accorded to older people by measuring indicators of status (rather than sentiments or identity issues) is considered a more appropriate approach in the context of a world grappling with the political, social and economic effects of a growing older population. These problems are not confined to age. Other sub-disciplines of history, such as gender, have already dealt with questions of who is to say what the reliable source is. The field has drawn successfully on the tools of autobiography and oral history (specifically for modern history). Pat Thane, for example, has used petitions against unwanted application of the New Poor Law to demonstrate that the aged were able to manipulate the system, and have not (always) internalized negative prejudices, emphasising thereby the importance of different layers and levels of understanding ageing historically (Thane 2003).

Why not make more use of artefacts? Using material sources within historical investigation is an established method of analysis in cultural history that can be employed to the benefit of the history of ageing. Using an array of sources remains important; and promising work is currently being produced by young scholars, for example in an oral history of nurses working at geriatric wards (Brooks 2009).

What has become clear is that historians of ageing grapple with interpretations that appear to be particularly challenging on a number of levels that can be addressed here only briefly: the lack of linearity and questions of age threshold; questions of ambiguous readings of interpretations and representations of ageing; and the role of the individual in shaping of meanings of old age within society (for example, old people living in hospices). In addition to questions of the social, cultural and political status of older people, the element of time is fundamental for ageing scholars. Time comes in different layers: it adds another dimension to the question about the differentiation of old age into distinguishable phases, such as the third and fourth age; it marks the importance of the onset of health care provision; it is vital to a (re)consideration of retirement age; and it works as a problematic parameter for gender studies and how bodies have shaped identities. Scholars have grappled with who counts as old. This is also significant in, for example, definitions of pathological or normal status of the health of older people, or in cultural practices in relation to the representation and medical treatment of menopause. Here the reliance of historians on sources is specifically treacherous, as ‘it is particularly difficult to evaluate whether one form of discourse is especially dominant at any one time’ (Johnson 1998: 5).
Conclusion

Where do we go from here? There are clearly both benefits and limitations of the ‘cultural turn’ for historical scholarship on ageing. The cultural turn in history has allowed the telling of a wider range of stories than those presented in conventional analysis. As a result a more diverse and nuanced picture has emerged that promises to provide a ‘fuller’ account of ageing, linking the individual experiences of older people with their public representations. Reconceptualizations of the interpretation of older people, social and critical gerontology as well as literary and gender studies have all added to the richness of the historical narrative. In its wake are also reconsiderations—highlighted by medical history approaches—that have returned to the vexed relationship between ageing and materiality. They illustrate how it is time to move beyond aspects of medicalization in an effort to understand the day-to-day lives of old people. This needs to encompass what gerontology has termed the fourth age (Gilleard and Higgs 2011), which remains the most challenging aspect for historical investigation, as it often goes beyond institutional history (and more easily accessible sources). It needs also to include the still under-researched field of kinship support, since intricate family structures and processes remain under-researched areas of the modern history of ageing (new work on the early modern period has begun to explore the impact of family structure on old age; see Ottaway 2004). Conversely, current social and critical gerontology would benefit enormously from considering the historical contextualization of its subject, allowing not only for unravelling of the contingencies of age in society but also for questioning the universality of ageing bodies and the failure to implement a fully embodied analysis. Despite the cultural turn, defining ‘old’ seems especially complicated when the subject is women, or (even more so) class or race, requiring a search for non-traditional evidence and re-framing of questions. Scholars have already called for more tightly focussed questions, be they in relation to regional, gender or class aspects (Botelho and Thane 2001, Johnson 1998). There is a gap in knowledge about other markers of difference, foremost class and ethnicity (for a recent exception: Hunter’s 2008 observations of changes in the experience of old age that affected all classes). Also missing are investigations into time periods that have been influential in shaping the socio-cultural and political dimensions of old age, for example the fascist era (for an exception see Schlegel-Voß 2005). Overarching cultural histories on ageing from a transnational perspective are also absent. The variation and ambiguities of ageing thus continue to present challenges to historians of old age (Thane 2003, Ehmer 2008, Rogers 1999). But it is worth remembering that sub-disciplines such as gender history have taken more than a generation to develop their position within historical scholarship, in part because their approaches cross disciplinary boundaries. A similar argument could be made about the development of ageing history. There is so much more left to explore. The involvement of historians in teasing out the continuities but also the changes in old age history is vital if we are to avoid narrow conceptions of old age in our future.

References

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