# Merging 'Critical Criminology' with 'Critical Gerontology'

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**Jason Powell**[1]

## Abstract

This paper analyses the extent to which aging has been overlooked by 'critical criminology'. The notion of 'aging' is introduced and the paper argues that there are strong conceptual insights from another discipline that Critical Criminology should learn epistemic and ontological lessons: Critical Gerontology, One can portend that there are three key theoretical approaches within the paradigm of 'Critical Gerontology': 'political economy of old age'; 'feminist gerontology'; and 'postmodern gerontology'. The invisibility of criminological perspectives is explicitly missing when one considers older people and crime. We can begin, however, by questioning what 'critical criminology' can be defined as and map out some of its leading theoretical approaches: left idealism; left realism; and culture of crime control. Ultimately, the paper highlights how insights from critical gerontology to critical gerontology opens up dialogue with older people and aging issues – a silent issue for too long.

## Introduction

This article explores how aging has been overlooked by the criminology of late modernity. We introduce the notion of 'aging' and argue that there are strands and conceptual insights from another discipline that Critical Criminology should learn epistemic and ontological lessons from: Critical Gerontology, To this end, one can suggest that there are three dimensions of 'Critical Gerontology': 'political economy of old age'; 'feminist gerontology'; and 'postmodern gerontology'. The invisibility of criminological perspectives is explicitly missing when one considers older people and crime. We can begin, however, by questioning what 'critical criminology' can be conceptualised as and discuss some of its theoretical approaches: left idealism; left realism; and culture of crime control – and relationship to critical gerontology.

The emergence of critical criminology 'was in the late 1960s and beyond at the cusp of change, its inspiration a world where oppressive relationships of class, gender and ethnicity became highlighted. Within criminology and the sociology of deviance the adversary was: 'establishment criminology', it was individualistic in focus, technicist in outlook and minimalist in theorizing, its aim was the social engineering of the 'maladjusted' individual into the ranks of the value consensual society (Sim, 1991). Similarly, in biomedical gerontology, such viewpoints stated that older people had traits of bodily and mental decline that shares ideas of criminological positivism in claiming to pathologies the decline trajectory once a person going through aging process (Wahidin, 2004).

In retrospect, the decade of the 1970s appears as a watershed, in which the intellectual, institutional and political assumptions of modern criminology were challenged, often in the name of a more radical social politics. It was during this decade that there arose a

[1] University of Central Lancashire, JPowell1@uclan.ac.uk

more "critical" approach of criminology, and questioning of criminology's relation to the state and criminal justice. Critical criminology itself is based upon the idea that causes of crime are the socio-economic forces operating within society illuminating struggle for dominance among competing social groups (classes, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, age, sexuality and disability). Society is held together by the power, authority, and coercion of dominant groups over subordinate groups. The most powerful members of dominant groups create the rules for success and opportunity in society, often denying subordinate groups success and opportunities and ensuring that the powerful continue to monopolise power, privilege, and authority. 'Left idealism' is a key theory within critical criminology, drawing its ideas from a basic Marxist perspective. For Karl Marx (1818-1883), modern capitalist societies were controlled by a wealthy few (bourgeoisie) who controlled the means of production (factories, raw materials, equipment, technology, etc.) while everyone else (the proletariat) was reduced to the lot of being wage labourers (Phillipson 1998). While Marx himself never really addressed in detail the criminal justice system's specific role in keeping such a system in place, from his writings a radical tradition has emerged (Powell 2005). On the other hand, left realism emerged in the 1980s as a response to the crime victims' movement of that decade. Victims forced criminologists to recognize that the primary victims of crime are not the wealthy, but the poor. Most predatory crimes are not "revolutionary" acts; they are attacks on family members and neighbourhood residents. Left realists recognize that the criminal justice system must act to stop criminal victimization without regard to the class of the perpetrators. At the same time, continued focus on the crimes committed by the rich and powerful is warranted. White collar and business related crimes remain important.

Thirdly, Garland (2001) presents a complex argument about the rise of a 'crime control complex' that is characteristic of late modernity. For Garland, the culture of crime control is characterised by the following attitudes, beliefs and assumptions in western culture: high crime rates are regarded as a 'normal' social fact; emotional investment in crime is widespread and intense and creates fear. The fastest growing mode of residential living is 'the gated community'. Garland argues that modern living and our adaptations to it are creating a world where prisoners are not the only ones who live in an 'iron cage of rationality'. Offenders have ceased to be seen as individuals in need of care and support and are viewed instead as 'responsible' and 'undeserving' – as so many risks to be managed. Rehabilitation of criminals is now inscribed in a framework of risk and private protection rather than one of public welfare and entitlement. Despite this rich form of critical theorizing, the experiences of older people are utterly forgotten. What lessons can critical criminology learn from understanding aging? Firstly, we want to take to task the very notion of 'aging'.

## What is aging?

There has been a lot of research studies on aging and old age to reduce the social experience of aging to its biological dimension from which are derived a set of age 'stages' which determine aging. Individual lives and physical and mental capacities which were thought to be determined solely by biological and psychological factors, are created by social environments (Phillipson 1998). Powell (2005) suggests that a dominant ideology of bio-medical models of aging suggests that persons with such biological aging "traits" have entered a spiral of decay. The effects of the dualism of 'decline' and 'decay' analogies can be explicitly seen in the dominance of biomedical solutions to the problems that aging is thought to raise.

Every modern society uses age categories to divide this ongoing process into stages or fragments of life. Therefore, aging is not to be considered the mere product of biological-psychological function rather a consequence of socio-cultural factors. Indeed, society has a number of culturally and socially defined notions of what Thomas R. Cole (1992) (cited in Powell 2005: 54) calls the "stages of life". The life stage model is still used in taken for

granted popular usage in society which impinges on how our lives are structured by bio-medical discourses of 'decay'.

In western societies, an persons 'age' is counted on a numerical foundation, beginning from birth to the current point of age, or when an individual has died. Chronological aging is a habit individuals engage in: work and retirement for example. Counting age can be seen as a social construction because it is a practice underpinned by the development of industrial capitalism (Phillipson, 1998). Hence, what is critical about aging, then, is how a society uses it to socially construct people into "populational categories".
The social spaces to grow old impinge upon "population formations" which aid policy makers' responses to social problems. Since the turn of the last century, the life expectancy of people born in the United States has increased by approximately 25 years and the proportion of persons 65 years or older has increased from 4% to over 13%. By the year 2030, one in five individuals in the U.S. is expected to be 65 years or older and people age 85 and older make up the fastest growing segment of the population. In 2000, there were 34 million people aged 65 or older in the United States that represented 13% of the overall population. By 2030 there will be 70 million over 65 in the United States, more than twice their number in 2000 (Powell 2005).

Comparatively, the population structure of western European countries including United Kingdom has changed since the turn of the 20th century. Whereas in 1901, just over 6% of the population were at or over current pension age (65 in the UK for men and women), this figure rose steadily to reach 18% in 2001. At the same time, the population of younger people under age 16 fell from 35% to 20%. The United Nations estimates that by the year 2025, the global population of those over 60 years will double, from 542 million in 1995 to around 1.2 billion people (Powell, 2005).

## Theorizing 'Critical Gerontology': Conceptual issues for Critical Criminology

One of the major problems in 'Critical Criminology' in recent years is that the study of aging is not developed. Theoretical developments in Critical Criminology pertaining to older people have lagged well behind other social and human science disciplines. George (1995) consolidates this by claiming that gerontological research is seen as "theoretically sterile". In other words, why would anyone want to research experiences of older people in terms of crime?

The emergence of the social theories of age and aging can be located to the early post-war years with the governmental concern about the consequences of demographic change and the shortage of younger people in work in UK (Phillipson 1998). In the post war years, social gerontology emerged as a multidisciplinary field of study which attempted to respond to the social, health and economic policy implications and projections of populational change (Phillipson, 1998). The wide disciplinary subject matter of social gerontology was shaped by significant external forces: first, by state intervention to achieve specific outcomes in health and social policy for older people; secondly, by a socio-political and economic environment which viewed an aging population as creating a 'social problem' for occidental societies (Powell 2005; Phillipson, 1998). The important point to note is that theories often mirror the norms and values of their creators and their social times, reflecting culturally dominant views of what should be the appropriate way to analyse social phenomenon.

## Conceptualizing Aging and Political Economy

Political Economy of Old Age is critical branch of Marxist gerontology developed as a direct response to the hegemonic dominance of structural functionalism in the form of disengagement theory, the biomedical paradigm and world economic crises of the 1970s. As Phillipson (1998) points out in the UK large forms of social expenditure were allocated to

older people. Consequently, not only were older people viewed in medical terms but in resource terms by successive governments. This brought a new perception to attitudes to age and aging.

Hence, the major focus is an interpretation of the relationship between aging and the economic structure especially relevant in world economic recession in 2012. For Phillipson (1998) political economy challenges the ideology of older people as belonging to a homogenous group unaffected by dominant structures in society. Phillipson (1979) claims political economy focuses upon an analysis of the state in contemporary societal formations. Phillipson (1998) looks to how the state decides and dictates who is allocated resources and who is not. Similarly, Phillipson (1998) considers how capitalism helps socially construct the social marginality of older people in key areas such as welfare delivery.

## Defining sociological interpretations of age and gender

There has been an development of Feminist gerontology into understanding connecting aging and gender (Arber & Ginn 1995). According to Acker (1988 cited in Arber and Ginn 1995) in modern societies the relations of distribution and production are influenced by gender and thus take on a gendered meaning. Gender relations of distribution in capitalist society are historically rooted and are transformed as the means of production change. Similarly, age relations are linked to the capitalist mode of production and relations of distribution. Arber and Ginn (1995) draws a mirror image between western cosmetic surgery and the genital mutilation carried out in some African societies: both cultured practices demonstrate the pressure on women to comply with male standards of desirability and the extent of patriarchal power.

## Mapping out Aging in a Postmodern world

Recently, there has been interest in Postmodern perspectives of age and aging identity underpinned by discourses of positive lifestyles and increased leisure opportunities for older people due to healthier lifestyles and increased use of bio-technologies to facilitate the longevity of human experiences (Powell 2005). The roots of 'postmodern gerontology' derive from Jaber F. Gubrium's (1975) work on Alzheimer's disease in the USA; old age is seen as a "mask" which conceals the identity of the older person beneath. There are two underlying issues for Powell (2005) which should be understood as the basis for understanding postmodern gerontology. Firstly, the mask of aging alerts people to the possibility that a tension exists between the external appearance of the body and face and functional capacities and the internal experience of personal identity. Secondly, older people are 'fixed' to roles without resources which does not do justice to individual biographies.

## Conclusion

The theories of critical gerontology and critical criminology have been at the forefront of understanding old age and crime respectively in occidental societies. Taken together, these three theoretical currents have been influential in providing critical gerontology with a rich social dimension. Such social theories have been used also to analyse pressing social issues such as, elder abuse, the gendered nature of age, the politics of power relations between older people and state/society and community care – lessons for critical criminology to ponder.

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