Biopolitics and the Collective Predicament

BY JAMES F. STARK*

TIAGO MOREIRA. *Science, Technology and the Ageing Society*. London: Routledge, 2016. 228 pp., illus. ISBN 978-1138814127. £99.99 (hardcover).

PAOLO PALLADINO. *Biopolitics and the Philosophy of Death*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. 288 pp., illus. ISBN 978-1474282994. $114 (hardcover).

Peter Laslett's 1984 introduction to a special issue of *Ageing & Society* on the history of aging was rooted in demographics.[1] How populations aged, changing patterns and markers of the lifecourse, and attempts to explain policy in relation to these were fundamental aspects of emerging histories of aging. Since this, the challenges accompanying demographic change—often conflated with "the ageing society"—have inspired a large body of both historical and sociological literature that has sought to broaden debates about the experience of aging, as well as scholarship from across the arts and humanities.[2] Building on a long-standing tradition of aging as a source of social anxiety, much of this scholarship has sought to highlight the complex relationships between social factors—gender, race, class—and biological understandings of what aging is.[3]

At the very outset of *Science, Technology and the Ageing Society*, sociologist Tiago Moreira characterizes "the ageing society" as "a collective predicament, a swelling uncertainty concerning how to deploy procedures of scientific

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1. Peter Laslett, "The Significance of the Past in the Study of Ageing," *Ageing and Society* 4, no. 4 (1984): 379–89.

2. Some of the most telling contributions toward cultural analyses of aging have emerged from literature, such as work by Margaret Gullette and Kay Heath. Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Kay Heath, *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009).

3. Amongst this very large body of work, it is worth highlighting Pat Thane (ed.), *The Long History of Old Age* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), which contains a number of essays that paved the way for a step-change in our understanding of aging in the past and present.

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research and technological innovation in addressing ageing as an issue" (1). Moreira highlights the critical lens that recent scholarship has turned on the assumption that an aging population must be equated with decreasing social stability and productivity. The rise of optimistic perspectives on aging societies, and their historical ubiquity, forms a complex backdrop to Moreira's own study, which draws explicitly and self-consciously on the dual methodological foundations of Foucauldian "histories of the present" and Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Moreira's period of study with John Law perhaps explains his affinity with ANT, which, he argues, is "an adequate conceptual tool to pursue a genealogical 'history of the present'" (8). The Foucauldian-ANT approach serves to underpin a vision of the aging society that recognizes its inherent plurality, though his mobilization of "contradictory agencements and assemblages" (9) might raise eyebrows amongst historians averse to such terminology.

Chapter 3, in which Moreira traces the emergence and development of the very concept of an aging society, focuses mainly on large-scale institutional perspectives from the United Nations and national government. Here, it becomes clear that one of the key "assemblages" with which Moreira is concerned is the mobilization of different forms of expertise to create a narrative of aging societies that intersected with economic reform, the welfare state, and broader policy initiatives across Europe and North America. As a consequence, we see the aging society not as a simple demographic change, but as a lattice of a huge range of interconnected socio-political issues—an "epistemic assemblage" (50)—framed against the backdrop of an aging population. Moreira is explicit in linking the preoccupation with aging societies in the developed world with Malthusianism and the multiple threads of eugenic policy and practice in the first half of the twentieth century.

Subsequent chapters are focused on explaining the circumstances surrounding the coming-into-being of the focal epistemic assemblage, and in particular how scientific and technical factors both supported the construction of, and attempted to circumvent the perceived negative implications of, this aging society. Chapter 4, for example, argues that major policy interventions of the twentieth century relied on and reinforced the basic assumption that extracting additional labor and maximizing productivity were essential components of managing aging populations (70). Moreira then moves in chapter 5 to consider the significance of chronological age as a marker of specific periods within the lifecourse: entitlement to benefits, pensions, retirement. Here, state interventions once again loom large in Moreira's account. Yet as he charts the rise of increasing critiques of chronological age from a variety of quarters in the 1940s,

commercial entities—which had earlier both exploited and driven the increasing fragmentation of the lifecourse on chronological grounds—are a surprising omission. It would have been refreshing to consider not only large-scale state initiatives, but also the fundamental centrality of chronological age in products as diverse as dietetics, fashion, and leisure, a trend that has stubbornly resisted the critiques emerging from the "biological, behavioural and social sciences" (81). In the first half of the twentieth century, popular texts, such as Walter Pitkin's *Life Begins at Forty* (1932) reflected a deeply embedded cultural dimension to the lifecourse, particularly so-called middle age, whilst cultural forms also traced narratives of progress and decline, explored particularly in Margaret Morganroth Gullette's *Aged by Culture* (2004). It is here that Moreira's study of the aging society would particularly benefit from a wider engagement with such perspectives, since the revisitation of chronological aging—and shift to a pluralistic understanding of the aging process—charted by Moreira in chapter 5, has clear parallels in cultural critiques of phenomenon.

The move toward an individualized account of aging—with personal variation from a broad overarching narrative as its central feature—is the subject of chapter 6. Moreira outlines a compelling argument through the lens of the ongoing Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging (BLSA, established in 1958) that individual cases came to embody very different levels of epistemic significance. Individuals, Moreira argues, were ~~at the core~~ of BSLA's architect-in-chief, Nathan Shock, who regarded them as the fundamental functional unit on which the problem of aging came to bear. In response to the changing conceptual framework of exactly where policies aimed at alleviating the "problem of ageing" should focus, chapter 7 unpacks the pervasive and critical practices of active aging as a natural product of the reconfiguration of aging as a process most usefully located at the level of the individual. Understanding active aging as "the group of policies, programmes and interventions that aim to increase older people's participation in the economy" (119), Moreira traces more recent constellations of practices to experimental investigations of human efficiency and fatigue, often underpinned by a military imperative. In a nod to the Stakhanovite movement that characterized Soviet labor promotion during the latter stages of the second Five Year Plan, normal, healthy aging became the benchmark against which efforts to maximize the economic productivity of older people.

Despite its title, Moreira's account of aging is more closely aligned with science than technology. With the exception of chapter 8, "Caring for Ageing," it is the efforts to measure and quantify aging, and to mitigate its effects on society, that constitute the core of his account. At the same time, whilst the

technologies of care considered here are of course a critical factor in understanding how aging has interfaced with social structures (and continues to do so), the technologies of management throughout later life are equally resonant with such themes. The "prosthetic environment" does feature (152–53), but this is, as Moreira notes, a feature of the behaviorism of B. F. Skinner, which focuses on the self-management of people in later life rather than a mechanism to consider the impact of prosthetic technologies. As a consequence, the absence of a complete consideration of disability (not included in the index) stands as an indication that the interrelations between technology and the aging society have yet to be fully mapped and understood. *Science, Technology and the Ageing Society* provides one of the most comprehensive overviews of the construction of the aging society, articulating a complex relationship among scientific thought, social change, and policy.

Meanwhile, in a more polemical account, we find Paolo Palladino in full-throated cry in the introduction to *Biopolitics and the Philosophy of Death* as he argues that "[t]here is no agreed understanding of ageing and death as objective, biological phenomena, only competing and yet complexly interrelated explanations" (11). Invoking Foucault and Deleuze chief amongst the objects of his theoretical interest, Palladino seems to suggest that "transforming life into Life Itself" (12), privileging the state of being alive above all others, constitutes nothing more than a secular manifestation of yearnings formerly filled by "God and Man" (12).

Palladino skates effortlessly over historical, sociological, and philosophical literature in a book perhaps best described as a porous philosophy of biology, equally at home discussing the nuances of August Weismann's reflections on the biology of death and Nathan Shock's mid-twentieth-century research on aging as the unforgiving terrain carved out by Martin Heidegger. Palladino's liberation from disciplinary conventions is evident in his reinterpretation of Weismann as not just one of the central figures in biological thought—heralded by Freud and Bergson—but "just as important to the evolution of post-structuralist understanding of what it is to be human and what it is to be invested in understanding the truth of the human condition" (22). Teasing out the philosophical implications of biological thought is critical for Palladino's enterprise, which makes his omission of considerations attending reductionism and holism slightly perplexing. How, for instance, did those invested in mechanism draw on Weismann's pre-gene pronouncements? And how did the high-profile attempts to correlate cellular or even molecular states with pathologies from the 1930s inform debates about the reducibility of biological phenomena such as aging? The very public

spat between Peter Medawar—self-styled spokesperson of mainstream (reductionist) biology—and novelist and sometime philosopher of science Arthur Koestler—surrounded by an enclave of anti-reductionist biologists—is illustrative of a particular moment in biological thought that has come to function as a supposedly unproblematic backdrop to the emergence of conceptions of life and its origins. This context remains underexplored in Palladino's account, yet such lacunae serve to reinforce the sheer breadth of the topic under consideration. After all, just as contemporary regenerative medicine has miraculously erased memories of the hubristic biotech boom of the 1990s with its "biomedical answer to the limits imposed by the inevitable decay of physiological function" (Palladino, invoking Melinda Cooper, 46), so too did the biomedicine of the early-to-mid-twentieth century attempt to position itself as a possible agent of mass human regeneration.

The central portion of the book, covering four chapters, adopts a more straightforwardly historical approach, and it is here that Palladino is at his most effective, providing an innovative and engaging account of the development of biomedical perspectives on the aging process through the mid-twentieth century. The ~~pivot~~ of this account is, as one might expect, Leonard Hayflick's "notion that ageing and mortality were inherent properties of the cell" (116), yet rather than explore the consequences of the so-called Hayflick limit for the biological sciences alone, Palladino soon pivots in the quotation-heavy chapter 5, "Forging the Future," to bring such perspectives into dialogue with his philosophical concerns: connecting interrogations of the nature of biological aging with biopolitics. In making this turn, the critical distinction between advocates of anti-aging and biogerontologists stands as an important feature of the argument, the former promoting "an interventionist, therapeutic approach to ageing," the latter claiming "that there is nothing either discrete or natural about ageing" (138). This speaks to long-standing debates about the nature of aging as either a natural or pathological process, to be managed or treated, and whether it is the role of medical science to "manage decline" or cure all conditions, even those characteristic of later life.

Weismann is clearly a figure who fascinates Palladino, and his recurrence in the role of chronological interloper—as well as forms of derived Weismannism—throughout *Biopolitics and the Philosophy of Death* speaks decisively to this status.[4] Eschewing the biographical convention, however,

4. Recent biographies of Weismann have served to expand our understanding of his significance within debates within the biological sciences, and in nineteenth-century degeneration

enables Palladino to trace the longer legacy of Weismann's work not previously identified. Mobilizing a diverse cast of figures to "make sense of the present moment" (204), Palladino argues, provocatively, that "the fate of power and the fate of the mortal organism are perhaps inseparable" (145). Where is death in all this? When this question arises, we can feel the hand of Foucault strong throughout, yet the key contribution of the volume is, in my opinion, not to outline a "philosophy of death," but to articulate a historically grounded explanation for the influence of biological thought on mortality. It is also a self-conscious response to post-humanism: in Palladino's words he "sought to resist all post-humanist temptation to find a new and alternative plane of consistency," looking instead to "all things in their wholly unsettling dispersion" (206). It is at these moments that the language engenders a lack of clarity in the overall argument, and a more concrete grounding in specific practices or approaches in the contemporary world—Palladino's promised focus—would help us to make more sense of his enterprise. Ultimately, *Biopolitics and the Philosophy of Death* might have taken the issue further by exploring not just death-as-cessation-of-life, but the cultural practices around memorialization and remembrance, increasingly seen across a range of disciplines as critical components of a wider conceptual framework around death and its meanings, markers, and significance.

Collectively, then, where do these books take us? For his part, Moreira's characterization of the aging society invites further examination of the myriad connections between major societal trends that were contingent on scientific understandings of the human body. In some ways this is a parallel of the extensive historical scholarship on eugenics as both an expression of biological thought and social engineering, yet other avenues remain to be explored. In particular, is active aging best understood as a product of a new political initiative, or simply a reconfiguration of existing practices? Can we draw connections between particular forms of active aging in specific national or cultural contexts? Palladino provides a new framework for an integrated approach to the history and philosophy of science, following in the tradition of the iHPS and &HPS communities.[5] His mobilization of historical evidence to support

thought most particularly. See, for a particularly compelling example, Frederick B. Churchill, *August Weismann: Development, Heredity, and Evolution* (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2015).

5. For more on &HPS, which holds meetings aimed toward an integrated approach across history and philosophy of science, see Committee for Integrated HPS, http://integratedhps.org/en/. There is also a parallel UK Integrated HPS Network.

a reinterpretation of major philosophical issues is emblematic of this approach, yet in the framing of biopolitics as a central organizing principle—squarely placing the book as an opportunity to revisit and reinterpret Foucault—it represents a novel turn.

Methodologically, historians can particularly look to *Biopolitics and the Philosophy of Death* for critical new insights into how historical inquiry can be coupled seamlessly with philosophical engagement. At the same time, *Science, Technology and the Ageing Society* represents a way of bringing the past into dialogue with present-day concerns without losing sight of the context-dependency of many of those key foundational events in the second half of the twentieth century, which established a policy environment built around the assemblage of the aging society.

There are also senses in which the arguments might be brought into dialogue with one another. Each crafts a narrative related to aging that depends on quite separate ideas—biopolitics does not feature in Moreira's account, whilst Palladino largely skates over the policy aspects of the aging society. However, both books are also representative of a maturing field in which the extensive critique of chronological age has given rise to a pluralistic understanding of aging as a multifaceted process, and a series of innovative scholarly accounts of the life course.[6] Given the methodological similarity between studies that explore critically aspects across the life course—from conception to death—might the time be right to explore in a more synthetic fashion the potential connectivity between aging and childhood studies? To go a step further, considering the interplay between themes explored by Moreira and Palladino invites us to reflect on whether aging studies might be best reframed as part of a broader interrogation of the lifecourse. Such realignment might yield productive insights into how we understand one of the most fundamental bio-social questions: everyone's time is limited, so what do we do with it? Our thinking on this issue, and the significance of bringing historical context to bear on questions of pressing contemporary relevance has come a considerable distance since the focus on "kinship simulation [and] implied historical comparison," which was so characteristic of the 1984 special issue overseen by Laslett.[7]

6. See, for example, Mark Harrison's forthcoming book offering critical reflections on "midlife," and Steven Mintz's *The Prime of Life: A History of Modern Adulthood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), as well as Charlotte Greenhalgh's *Aging in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

7. Laslett, "The Significance of the Past" (ref. 1), 388.