

International Perspectives on Aging 7  
Series Editors: Jason L. Powell, Sheying Chen

Steven L. Arxer  
John W. Murphy *Editors*

# The Symbolism of Globalization, Development, and Aging

 Springer

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Steven L. Arxer • John W. Murphy  
Editors

# The Symbolism of Globalization, Development, and Aging

 Springer

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# Preface

Presupposed by the contributors to this volume is that a new era has dawned in the field of social theory. Habermas (1992), for example, refers to this period as “post-metaphysical.” At the core of this designation is a dramatic shift in philosophy, almost another Copernican revolution. Gone is the traditional commitment to first philosophy, which is characterized traditionally by a search for an absolute foundation for knowledge and order. Subsequent to the onset of post-metaphysics, this trek is considered to be futile.

The problem is that first philosophy is premised on a rendition of dualism that has lost legitimacy in many quarters. Following the work of a host of writers, in both the humanities and the sciences, this principle is defunct (Caro and Murphy 2002). For example, in both quantum physics and philosophies, such as phenomenology, reality and the human presence are understood to be intimately intertwined. Reality, simply put, is shaped by human intervention. The pursuit of objectivity, therefore, is eclipsed by the idea that all knowledge claims reflect particular judgments and commitments. As Roland Barthes (1988) describes this change, objectivity represents little more than a particular interpretation of acceptable knowledge.

Social gerontology is not exempt from this trend. Aging, accordingly, can no longer be thought legitimately to adhere to a natural trajectory. Consistent with the post-metaphysical thesis, this process is mediated fully by language use and other symbolic facets of social existence. For this reason, while relying on the insights of Simone de Beauvoir (2010), age does not simply exist but is embedded in how persons choose to construct or make their lives.

In this sense, a key point of this book is that aging is symbolic. Certain assumptions are advanced, accordingly, that determine the so-called normal life course. And the outcomes of these beliefs are not natural but simply regularly imbibed by persons. Hence a particular option for constructing a meaningful existence is passed off as natural, even inevitable.

The other side of this message is that this typical interpretation of aging can be rejected, without violating human nature or some other dictum. For this reason, the editors conclude that persons must learn to age authentically, that is, view their lives as possibilities that can be constructed in any number of ways. In this way, social

gerontology recognizes the uncertainty that haunts everyone's existence and can be transformed into freedom.

But this awareness is not limited to philosophical reflection. This change in viewing knowledge has political implications. Questions can be raised, for example, about how certain interpretations of legitimate aging gained dominance over others and, gradually, became unduly restrictive. And in the end, the issue of who benefits from the construction of this illusion becomes important.

Raising issues such as these certainly aids authentic aging. Specifically important is that an alternative context for aging is created where various options can be explored without coercion. An openness is available that, as Sartre (1994) says, condemns persons to be free. Every life thus represents contingency that must be made into reality, without recourse to dominant symbolism that can be treated as existing *sui generis*.

In this regard, aging is affected by post-metaphysics. Even the decay of the flesh, a seemingly natural process, cannot escape from the symbolism that inundates existence. And given that everyone is incarnated in the flesh, aging is of vital importance for most persons (Merleau-Ponty 1968). But like symbolic in general, the fate of the flesh is ambiguous and must be given meaning. Hence aging should not be filled with the dread that accompanies the certainty often associated with decline and death. The flesh does not demand such pessimism but invites the speculation linked with uncertainty and openness.

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# Contents

<b>1 Introduction</b> .....	1
Steven L. Arxer and John W. Murphy	
<b>2 The ‘Total Market,’ Globalization, and Discourses of Aging</b> .....	13
Vicente Berdayes	
<b>3 Globalization, Neoliberal Development, and Ontological Tyranny</b> .....	29
Luigi Esposito	
<b>4 Globalization, the Labor Market, and Retirement</b> .....	47
William Van Lear	
<b>5 Globalization, Aging, and the Power of the Image</b> .....	59
Tom Semm and Kyra Greene	
<b>6 Globalization, Time, and Aging</b> .....	67
Steven L. Arxer	
<b>7 Cultural or Latent Background of Aging</b> .....	81
John W. Murphy	
<b>8 Successful/Productive Aging, Responsibility, and Reflection</b> .....	91
Linda Liska Belgrave and Bisma Ali Sayed	
<b>9 Globalization, the Body, and the Corporate Model</b> .....	109
Jung Min Choi and Venoosheh Khaksar	
<b>10 Globalization, Technology, and Human Development</b> .....	119
David L. Reznik	
<b>11 Anticulture and Aging</b> .....	135
Eric Mark Kramer and Elaine Hsieh	
<b>12 Conclusion</b> .....	157
Steven L. Arxer and John W. Murphy	
<b>Index</b> .....	163



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Steven L. Arxer and John W. Murphy

This book examines the conceptual assumptions that shape and obscure understandings of the aging process, particularly in the current “era of globalization.” To a great extent, globalization constitutes for many scholars the most important feature of the twenty-first century that cuts across and transforms all dimensions of social life, including aging (Dannefer and Settersten 2010). At this juncture of history, knowledge about aging is constructed and directed by specific “deep assumptions” that organize perceptions, attitudes, and practices (Schutz 1964). These theoretical commitments provide a portrayal of aging that emphasizes biomedical perspectives, particular social and political discourses, and professional strategies that determine how this process is viewed.

Specifically noteworthy is that current discourses about globalization supply social imagery that unduly narrows how aging is understood. A claim made in this book is that a message is presented that justifies conditions of inequality, conflict, and reductionism that many social gerontologists currently seek to overcome. As will be argued in later chapters, the source of these problems stems from the alienation of individuals from themselves and social institutions that is encouraged by dominant descriptions of globalization. What happens is that individuals are subtly caged within social imagery that supports a skewed distribution of material and cultural resources that shapes and limits life trajectories.

In their popular book, *Successful Aging*, Rowe and Kahn (1998) imagine the twenty-first century as heralding a new era in gerontology, the study of aging.

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These authors note that throughout the 1970s and 1980s, gerontology was fueled by an awareness of the unprecedented aging of the American population. Despite the foresight of scholars to see the new impending relevance of social gerontology, the development of this field of study was slow going. According to Rowe and Kahn, this occurred because gerontologists lacked the theoretical foundation required to understand aging in all its various aspects—namely, biological, psychological, and social dimensions. Hence, a narrow view of old age is perpetuated without any recognition of the real and diverse nature of older persons.

In the same vein, Bass et al. (1990) argue that until relatively recently little attention was paid to the diversity among the older population. For although gerontologists recognized the rapid demographic changes occurring in this population, many writers in the 1970s and 1980s “view[ed] the elderly as a nameless and faceless mass of persons whose age bracket—65 and older—gives each the same needs and wants” (Stanford and Stanford 2000, p. 97). They assumed that older persons were more alike than different in terms of their needs, desires, and experiences.

This rapidly growing and aging population, which consists of a higher percentage of ethnically and culturally diverse people than ever before, points to the need for better theory and models in gerontology. Indeed, with the prospect of approximately 65 million persons being 65 and older by the year 2030 in the United States, there is a clear need to plan for the recognition and acceptance of this group (Stanford and Torres-Gil 1991, p. 5–6). For example, this emerging diversity calls into question how gerontologists might respond to the needs of older individuals and design social programs. As the demographic landscape of countries changes, social gerontologists must recognize aging to be a heterogeneous rather than a homogenous process. Speaking about the North American context, Stanford (1994, p. 1) discusses the impact of such a diverse older population:

as the older population increases and becomes more diverse, it becomes a driving force for changes required to meet the challenge of providing the quality of life we have come to expect. Aggregate skills and energy will need to be mobilized. Diversity as a social force will require us to consider how different needs can be met . . . Older Americans are no longer bound by locale as they once were. The diversity they have brought to many communities has caused community leaders to re-think the way they plan programs and services. They can no longer plan as if the aged were homogenous. Diversity as a social force will help change the way bureaucracies perceive their roles and responsibilities and the way they operationalize their activities.

Given this juggernaut, Rowe and Kahn mention the need for a “new gerontology.” The goal in this case is to develop a new conceptual framework that allows gerontologists to address the ever-increasing dimensions of aging. In this way, the diverse nature and impact of aging can be appreciated. This book argues that an important obstacle to this goal is a reliance on outmoded symbolization that unduly restricts ideas about and approaches to dealing with aging.

## The Symbolism of Aging

As the etymology of the term suggests, symbols (*symbolē*) represent an active process that gives meaning and direction to reality (literally, “throws” reality together). In this case, legitimacy and necessity are granted to certain assumptions about key cultural concepts, such as temporality, normativity, development, and the body, which come to be viewed gradually as normal and expected. This book recognizes this condition to be the result of two important philosophical positions that are tied to the modern Western intellectual tradition.

First, the cornerstone of gerontology has been a commitment to science as a system of epistemological principles, conceptual models, and practices that trap aging within the confines of biomedicine (Powell 2006, p. 4). What emerges is a new “object” of knowledge that can be empirically studied and verified. And second, the current hegemonic version of globalization—that is guided by neoliberal capitalism—supplies the material and cultural backdrop for guiding the aging process. Most important is the reliance on the market to support globalization.

A key contribution of this book is showing how the biomedical perspective of aging and globalization are deeply interconnected on a symbolic level. On the one hand, science promises to define and improve the “real” possibilities of aging. On the other, the market system inspires persons’ decisions about how to manage the aging process, so that their lives are prosperous. As Murphy and Callaghan (2011, p. 2) point out, a major consequence of this style of symbolization about the aging process is that failures “cannot be blamed on institutional sources.” After all, markets are believed to be self-regulating, while deficiencies are personal and result from not adopting attitudes and behaviors that are rewarded at the marketplace.

Examining the symbolic interconnection between science and globalization can illuminate both the relevance and significance they have for understanding how aging is socially constructed. This outcome requires that the assumptions be unraveled that underpin (1) “gerontology as a science” (Powell 2006 p. 4) and (2) the “mystification of market relations” (Murphy and Callaghan 2011, p. 2).

## Aging, Development, and Power

As noted earlier, Powell (2006, pp. 4–5) argues that the cornerstone of modern gerontology is the utilization of science to specify the nature of aging. This pursuit has been aided by the general “project of modernity,” whereby “the aging subject is constructed as an *object* of knowledge and as a seeker of that knowledge” (Powell 2006, p. 5, emphasis added). The promise of an objectified aging subject is a significant, albeit subtle, philosophical proposal. In particular, objectification implies that identity can be externalized to allow for observation and definition. In more philosophical parlance, dualism is adopted whereby the knower and what is

known are separated. This maneuver is thought to improve knowledge, since the imposed gap fosters clarity regarding the boundaries that define phenomena. A key feature of modernity is a commitment to a dualistic imagination and the application of science that concretizes the aging subject through empirical verification.

To this end, Western gerontology has been associated with and directed by positivistic and quantitative discourses (Katz 1996; Longino and Powell 2004). The focus thus becomes the empirical conditions that constitute aging subjects. Indeed, modern gerontology has sought to locate the aging subject within a naturalistic model; specifically, aging is understood in terms of “individual abilities, needs, and functions” (Powell 2006, p. 4). Furthermore, medical-scientific knowledge plays a significant role in classifying the social and physical facets of existence, so that persons have a clearly delimited identity (e.g., the social construction of different age-groups in society). Popularly known as the “biomedical model,” this outlook remains to a large extent the “master narrative” in gerontology (Biggs and Powell 2001).

To be sure, gerontology today is viewed as an interdisciplinary endeavor. Accordingly, no single discourse should dominate because the aging process encompasses a broad range of experiences and extends beyond the scope of any particular knowledge base. For this reason, gerontologists often adopt a three-pronged strategy (Cavanaugh and Blanchard-Fields 2002). Researchers and practitioners have argued that aging should be studied with respect to its biological, psychological, and social aspects (Cavanaugh and Blanchard-Fields 2002, p. 6). A variety of writers, however, have noted that gerontology continues to promote a reductionistic, biomedical view of aging (Rowe 1997; Achenbaum and Bengtson 1994; Baltes and Baltes 1990; Bytheway 1995; Powell 2006). For instance, Rowe and Kahn (1998, p. xi) acknowledge that up until the 1980s the conceptual foundation of gerontology favored biological explanations of issues, even when psychological and social dimensions are obvious.

According to Bytheway (1995), the root of this problem is the manner in which scientific discourses position aging within a developmental scheme. Here the organismic concepts of “growth” and “decline” play a vital role in articulating the empirical or “real” changes that occur to aging persons in terms of biology, with other considerations assumed to be supplemental. In this regard, organisms are imagined to have a life cycle that begins with growth and is marked by life transitions. But eventually, the organism slows and reaches “old age,” which is defined as when decline occurs.

A consequence of this imagery is that growth is equated with positive development and aging linked with entropy. As is well known, this portrayal led early gerontologists (Cumming and Henry 1961) to argue that aging persons’ physical decline should correspond with them gradually disengaging from social life (Cumming and Henry 1961). This preoccupation with the “negative” side of aging hindered the ability of gerontologists to appreciate that aging could be defined in different ways. As Rowe and Kahn (1998) note, by assuming that aging is synonymous with an inevitable degenerative process, the role that individual or social factors play in promoting particular experiences of aging was obscured.

Recent work suggests that the aging process is not necessarily linked to inevitable outcomes and expectations but rather is affected by human volition (Estes and Associates 2000; Lynott and Lynott 1996). What is important now is the interaction

between the individual and environment, along with how this dynamic affects the experience of aging (Gubrium 1973). As a major lens in gerontology, the life-course perspective identifies aging to be a product of both individuals and social structures, thereby illustrating that relevant social conditions can alter patterns of development and aging (Cain 1964; Dannefer and Settersten 2010).

A perspective referred to as “positive aging” attempts to recognize this agenic character to aging, but the biomedical developmental paradigm is not necessarily abandoned (Katz 1996; Powell 2006). The chronolization of life continues to be a deep assumption of this variant of the life-course perspective, in that persons are positioned on a timeline. In this way, later life is still a special moment that signals decline, with persons granted the latitude to manage any outcomes. Aging remains interpreted as decline, as opposed to *change*, and is positioned on a biological continuum.

Aging, therefore, represents a location where power is exercised through the use of discourses. Although this developmental scheme appears to be natural, Powell (2006, p. 5) declares that “power games” are operating behind the scenes through the adoption of specific symbolic formations. These power games are played out at the discursive level where “truth codes and conventions” are constructed through a reliance on privileged knowledge. In this case, particularly scientific and technical knowledge is considered to be universally valid for describing social life. This penchant for introducing biomedical descriptives dominates discussions to the extent that “aging ... cannot be imagined as an alternative except as an abnormality that can be understood only through biomedical science” (Powell 2006, p. 6).

Foucault’s (1977) ideas regarding the relationship between knowledge and power are pertinent at this juncture. In particular, Foucault recognizes that knowledge bases gain status and power through their ability to control bodies. Surveillance, for example, is a strategy that is employed often to ensure compliance from populations. With respect to aging, biomedicine weaves a web of negative ideas and builds a culture of aging that constructs symbolically the aging body as a “problem.” When the aging body is linked to decline, according to Powell (2006, p. 6), institutions emerge to “manage the ‘problems’” related to this process, in the form of nursing care and other social interventions for older persons. In this regard, the market plays a key role in determining who should drop out of society, due to the inability to compete in important institutions.

## **Aging, Globalization, and the Market**

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, discussions of globalization and aging have generated a growing body of literature. Drawing on the life-course perspective, gerontologists generally approach the topic of aging as an issue of “linked lives” and their expanding relevance in a global context (Dannefer and Settersten 2010; Elder and Johnson 2003; Settersten 2003). Simply put, the course of individuals’ lives is interconnected with the needs, conditions, and choices of others. Globalization sets in motion a set of economic, political, social, and other processes that link the lives of

people across the globe. Most notably, the global processes of production and consumption have impact on age peers, as well as across different age groups. For example, the disparate economic circumstances of individuals in the global north and south trigger the northern migration of older women to work in care industries (Calasanti 2010). Coupled with this change is the weakening of the institutions that serve older people and the increased risks that they face due to the reconfiguration of the state in neoliberal globalization (Dannefer 2003; Phillipson et al. 2003).

Although sophisticated, definitions such as these may benefit from examining more closely the symbolic side of globalization for its power to shape constructions of aging. Specifically, detailing the empirical processes and characteristics of globally linked lives (e.g., the risks people face) may side step the important issue of how these aging experiences and inequalities are *legitimized*. This theoretical consideration is important because globalization supplies imagery about the aging experience that leads to the marginalization and inferiorization of persons.

This symbolic process is at the core of this book. After all, simply having different characteristics (e.g., old age) is not sufficient to rationalize exclusion or marginalization. Subordination is not natural; an effort must be made to cast particular people in a negative light. Because empirical elements do not automatically carry a cultural sign of inferiority, specific physical or social differences must be identified as a “risk” or “problem” before persons are legitimately marginalized. This problem raises the question of who has the ability to enact and enforce this process.

Della Fave (1980), in this respect, argues that issues related to social risk and exclusion carry a moment of symbolic legitimation. Before marginalization takes place, the belief must first be impressed on “a large majority of the populace that institutionalized inequality in the distribution of primary resources—such as power, wealth, and prestige—is essentially right and reasonable” (Della Fave 1980, p. 955). Without legitimation the public may regard an uneven allocation of cultural and material resources as distributive injustice. Particularly in a democratic society, where beliefs about equality and fairness are deeply rooted in the citizenry, the maintenance of a system of stratification requires that primary resources be distributed in a manner consistent with the public’s expectations. Without this correspondence, the prevailing modes of resource allocation may come to be viewed as unjust and unacceptable.

A reorientation toward the issue of legitimation is beneficial when studying aging. Such reflection can expose new dimensions in the powerful interplay between aging and global processes. Specifically, the market mechanism that operates within current neoliberal globalization steers attention away from the ways in which the aging process is controlled. This is accomplished through subtle social imagery that naturalizes the effects of the global marketplace. In this way, symbolism supplies the necessary legitimation that supports the uneven distribution of cultural and material resources. As will be shown in the chapters of this volume, globalization’s attendant values shape the social construction of aging in ways that are insulated from serious critique.

The marketplace has a unique role and status within contemporary discussions of globalization. Neoliberal economists argue that as persons compete freely for valued resources, the apolitical laws of the market, such supply and demand, ensure a free, rational, and prosperous society. In other words, inequalities in power, social status,

or wealth are justified so long as these disparities emerged from free competition. As functionalists like to say, social stratification is the outcome of differences in individual merit, abilities, and contributions that have been fairly evaluated at the marketplace. Social disparities are thus not necessarily problematic.

Simply put, neoliberals assume that unless tampering has occurred, the market fosters the common good and justice, *independent of human volition*. The market is capable of producing this result because this device operates on the so-called objective principles of “calculation, preferences, costs, profits, prices, and utility” (Smith 1988, p. 127). There should be no surprise why neoliberals are so excited about and even fetishize the market. For them the marketplace simply represents a mode of interaction that avoids the biases of prior economic forms, such as planned economies. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1988, p. 126) reveals, the value and legitimacy of the market stems first and foremost from the ability of traders to “escape or transcend economy altogether.”

The market is described as residing on a different ontological plane than individuals, above the influence of humans, due to the traits allotted to this mechanism. Specifically, the market offers individuals signals of future trends, along with a basis for sound decision-making. Successful aging, for example, is understood to be the result of obeying these signs, while personal and social dysfunction relates to ignoring market tendencies. In this way, the market promises optimal aging, so long as individuals respond appropriately. In more concrete terms, important considerations of aging, such as skills, self-esteem, and utility, are defined by how “in demand” certain qualities are at the marketplace. In the end, however, the desires and experiences associated with aging are divorced from human inclinations, and thus real human needs become ancillary to the institutional demands of global economic and social forces.

The problem with this scenario is that development remains prescriptive, since certain characteristics are believed to be indicative of proper aging. Stated differently, with an indubitable reference point in place (i.e., the market), aging is viewed as a natural process. Persons are expected to participate in their own development; however, their inclusion consists of bringing the self into alignment with the standard aging profile that is best suited for a successful life under global capitalism.

In this way, the ageist dimension of the global market is rendered invisible and difficult to elude. Given that the market is presented as the storehouse of rationality, persons are reluctant to believe that such institutions are corrupt. For if the existing social system is corrupt, in this case the market, citizens will be left without a rational base of order! Indeed, persons may begin to worry whether a democratic society is possible without the presence of an impartial institutional foundation to ensure fair treatment.

Focusing on the symbolic interconnection between globalization and aging fosters critical reflection on the barriers to global integration and fair social outcomes. Given the unique status accorded to the market, inequality may not necessarily be interpreted by persons as a sign of institutional shortcomings. Instead, what is more likely is that individuals may engage in a process of self-inferiorization by applying market reasoning that defines them as losers at the marketplace. Definitions of successful aging, for example, begin to reflect the definitions set by the marketplace, as opposed to aging persons themselves.