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BOOK REVIEW

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# OUT OF TIME: THE PLEASURES AND THE PERILS OF AGEING

## by Lynne Segal

**London, UK: Verso, 2013. 320 pp.**

Lynne Segal's book *Out of Time* closes the gap between our lived experience of ageing and the stereotypes offered in popular narratives. She examines how a neo-liberal agenda exploits this gap by framing old age as a crisis to be medicalised and commodified, preparing the stage for intergenerational warfare. As an antidote, Segal turns to art, literature, and memoir for some verisimilitude with her own experience of ageing. From this material she fashions an authentic mirror for mutual encounter that can accommodate growth in the presence of loss, ill health, and death. Segal cites Auden's correction of the line "We must love one another *or* die" (Smith, 2004, p. 235) to "We must love one another *and* die" (Segal, 2013, p. 170): a correction that characterises Segal's insistence on becoming fully congruent.

Segal argues that the chapter on old age and how to live "the good life" is underwritten and needs wrestling off those who would tell us how to "age well". Where ageing well means to stay young, our sense of worth is conditional upon meeting approved levels of physical health and appearance. With some chagrin Segal recounts how, as a young activist, she sang, "Keep young and beautiful if you want to be loved" while on a women's march. She is wary of the apparent inclusivity of "agelessness" and offers Molly Andrews's warning that it "strips the old of their history and leaves them with nothing to offer but a mimicry of their youth" (Andrews, 1999, p. 317).

Segal understands that it is the inauthenticity of narratives that alienates us and prevents our capacity to flourish in old age. To this end she searches for authentic biographical and fictional accounts of ageing to help colour outside the lines of what is deemed age-appropriate. Where these needs are the inevitable consequence of dependency in old age this incongruence acts like an autoimmune disorder, attacking our own and others' successful maturation. Andrews (1999) argued that this splitting of old and young pits "body and soul against each other as if they were not part of the whole" (cited in Segal, 2013, p. 264).

Lynne Segal finds classic psychoanalysis as an intra-psychic explanation for our fear and distaste of old age to be congruent with a neo-liberal agenda that maligns dependency and curtails empathy. Classic psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and mainstream psychological theories of development tend to equate dependency beyond infancy with dysfunction; Segal points out how nonsensical this is as we only come into "existence and then acquire any kind of subjectivity through dependence on others" (p. 35).

The feminist writers and psychotherapists Jordan and Hartling (2008) argued instead that "we grow not toward separation, but toward greater mutuality and empathic possibility" (para. 3). The radical ontology of Carl Rogers's person-centred approach also shares Segal's objectives to explore what the conditions might be for creativity across the life span. The person-centred approach is unconcerned with categorical knowledge as it only serves to suppress authenticity and connection. Instead it is interested in how we can facilitate psychological freedom and foster creativity, congruence, and agency in our relationships with others. Our capacity for mutual empathy and mutual empowerment is the basis of a fully functioning person at any age.

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Segal offers poignant examples of the intricate nature of relationships between carers and those they care for. A situation in which "carers in different ways may be both invested in and dependent upon the presence and needs of those they care for" (p. 36). Levinas (1985, p. 121) argued that it is answering the call of the other which makes us fully human. Those of us in any kind of caring role need to remain open to our own vulnerability so as not to close this potential off. Segal relates the memoirs of those who were able to experience growth through caring for their parents with Alzheimer's, discovering a new-found immediacy, playfulness, and affection that hadn't characterized their relationships before. The American writer Judith Levine described how she enjoyed a kind of "contact dementia" with her father with his "rational world snookered I respond directly" to his experiential and emotional world (cited in Segal, 2013, p. 147). Levine argued that this potential for growth and creativity might better inform standardised medical care of dementia.

Ever vigilant of creating new splits to overcome existing ones, Segal determines to hold the complexity of interdependence. She relates accounts of transcendence found in spectacular isolation and solidarity. The Scottish poet, John Burnside, stressed that it is only "Once you have community then you can be alone" (cited in Segal, 2013, p. 255).

Segal identifies inequality as the only true division between people. She debunks the popular narratives that fuel the spurious intergenerational warfare. Segal explains how poverty exacerbates a sense of shame, which silences the marginalised and creates the space for this kind of divisive message to take hold. This sense of shame is a direct consequence of those in positions of power dominating the agenda. It was a conservative MP who wrote *The Pinch: How the Baby-Boomers Took Their Children's Future* . .. (Willets, 2010). It is not only via headline-grabbing polemic this is achieved but also by those with vast resources,

> *Flaunting only confidence, strength and autonomy, when life is inevitably full of losses and sorrows, leaves those who are furthest from the comforts, cosmetic manipulations and elixirs that money can buy all the more subject to humiliation. . . . [T]his is a rejection of life and collectivity . . . in its refusal to engage with the suffering and helplessness of other (Segal, 2013, p. 179).*

Such hardness is presented as strength in times of austerity. The person-centred approach is often described as being naive for its constructive view of the person, when in fact it takes courage to accept the unwieldy picture of what it is to be human without recourse to pathologising certain aspects of it. This is at its most challenging when we would rather control our own and the other's vulnerability and distress. However, it is only through being open to the possibility of being moved by and impacted by our clients that we can avoid having power over them.

Segal laments that in a youth-obsessed society, where being productive is a virtue, opportunities for gaining a favourable sense of our self as we grow old dramatically decrease. This conditionality is pervasive and informs the economic objective of the National Health Service's commitment to Improve Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT, see National Health Service, n.d.). These "treatments" are intended to "fix" people so they can get back to work; no matter that work might have been the source of their distress. The incongruity becomes farcical when the therapists themselves are often precariously employed and overworked themselves. As the focus is on employment, IAPT is inherently exclusive of those over working age despite extending access to the over 65s. As with all psychotherapy older people are significantly underrepresented. It is as though any of the needs that we have throughout our lives stop as soon as we hit retirement age. This reveals the underlying assumptions present in many therapeutic contexts that for a person to be of value they also need to be productive. Segal cites how Freud famously regarded the elderly as undeserving of psychoanalysis as they are uneducable (p. 20). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this rejection of old age is mirrored in his self-disgust towards his own aged self.

Doris Lessing, one of the most prominent and respected feminist writers, seemed to swallow whole Freud's theory that love is narcissistic identification, which for women can only be satisfied in their youth. Lessing's novel *Love, Again* (1997), warned of the humiliation awaiting the older woman if she acts on her sexual longings (cited in Segal, 2013, p. 108). Segal also reveals that Simone de Beauvoir was also unable to escape internalising narratives which shame older women as "old hags" who should hide away their sexual desires. De Beauvoir lamented that in old age "never again" will she be allowed to express her desire or display her yearnings publicly (cited in Segal, 2013, p. 7).

Segal views any gendered reductionism as damaging. Men fare no better, as successful masculinity is symbolically inseparable from their functioning penis. A symbolic doubling which, Segal argues, has been ruthlessly medicalised and exploited, evidenced by the huge economic success of Viagra.

Segal discovers, through her refusal to pit gender against gender, avenues for growth amidst the losses that come with age: the nature of this growth is shaped by the nature of the loss. Segal cites a Swedish study finding older men's new-found pleasure in the mutuality of touch and intimacy, a clear alternative to "phallic sexualities" (Sandberg, 2011, p. 258, cited in Segal, 2013, p. 90). This and other literature presented by Segal suggests that the more fluid our concepts of what it means to be male or female, or what sex and intimacy are, the more likely we are to experience growth and creativity throughout our old age.

Segal cites how an American LGBT group needed to close admissions to an over-80's lesbian coming-out event, as there were too many wishing to attend (Hollibaugh, 2011). This yearning for connection and continued zest for life leads me to end with Julian Barnes' imagined militant civil rights movement for old people. The demands include: making "old people fashionable not just acceptable"; "old people are to be loved more"; "positive discrimination in jobs and housing in favour of old people"; "free fun-drugs for the over eighties" (cited in Segal, 2013, p. 169).

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