CONCLUSION

Toward the Year 2001

We have reached a critical juncture in the history of growing old in the new land. Ideas about older people’s inherent worth and perspectives on their actual place in American society are in flux. Problems unforeseen and crises unimaginable even a decade ago make us question, and occasionally regret, previously enacted old-age policies. In attempting to determine where we are going, we sometimes seek to understand where we have been. We turn to the past, not to recapture a world we have lost but to learn the lessons of history.

In this context, I believe that historians have an unprecedented opportunity to play three crucial roles in writing the next chapter in the history of old age in the United States. They can work with other social scientists and humanists to formulate interpretations of the past that facilitate rather than complicate our ability to assess the elderly’s current conditions and future prospects. Second, I think that they should also assume a somewhat unfamiliar but increasingly significant task: historians ought to apply their expertise in trend analysis and actively engage in establishing and evaluating old-age priorities and policies. At the same time, however, they dare not forget that history is both an art and a science. Accordingly, they must continually sensitize themselves, other gerontologists, and concerned citizens, as well as the public at large, to the dynamic ways that implicit and explicit values shape our thoughts and influence our actions concerning old age.

Historians as Social Scientists

Nearly all available analyses of older Americans’ situations in past times directly or tangentially address a fundamental theoretical issue: to what degree does the process of “modernization” describe and explain continuities and changes in the history of old age? The appeal of modernization models arises, I suspect, from their presumed ability to demonstrate how a wide range of undeniably significant long-term developments—including, among
other things, increased life expectancy at birth, urbanization, industrialization, bureaucratization, and secularization—have affected the elderly over time. Mainly because modernization seems to be such a comprehensive concept, researchers to date have employed it alternately as an organizational device for recounting the key points in their narrative, as a theoretical construct for explicating and predicting social and cultural trends over time, and as a heuristic typology to help disclose vital questions. As they have generally been formulated, however, modernization models actually may confound efforts to study the aged in history because practitioners have often failed to appreciate their inherent conceptual problems and operational limitations.

In this regard, historians already have performed a useful function. Although their interest in old age per se is somewhat belated when compared to other social scientists, they have identified various problems with the overall "modernization" concept. It is clear, for instance, that because underdeveloped and/or nonwestern societies do not invariably conform to patterns of growth associated with the experiences of many European countries and the United States, we must squarely recognize the cultural biases of the modernization thesis. Most scholars, moreover, acknowledge that the societal changes associated with modernization have occurred in a slow and incremental manner. Hence they increasingly recommend expanding instead of shortening a project's temporal parameters and they challenge two-stage models that present a dramatic and complete break from a "traditional" order and the emergence of a radically different "modern" one. Yet liberating themselves from simplistic and deterministic models generally fuels more, not less, controversy.

Historians vehemently disagree about how to periodize the evolution of American society, in part because they articulate various conceptions of what features of social change were most important and because they reach different conclusions about when new structural and cultural configurations arose and/or displaced prevailing patterns. In large measure, however, the plethora of interpretations attests to the complexity of the process of modernization itself. That industrialization, bureaucratization, and urbanization were simultaneously reshaping society at a given moment does not necessarily mean that the impacts of these social forces were identical. Rarely has one aspect of modernization altered America to the same extent and at the same rate as another component. Furthermore, there have been important differences both in the timing and in the degree to which large-scale forces and cultural patterns impinge on various groups in society. These generalizations, in turn, lead to one final observation: teleological concerns too often erroneously intrude into analyses. Since the impact of modernization has been neither inevitable nor inexorable, it is risky as well as naive to write an epic tracing Americans' fall from grace or manifest destiny from a remote point in our development.
Not surprisingly, then, my research reveals that special care must be exercised in studying old age in past times. The history of growing old in America did not, and could not, neatly conform to the major lines of development in the prolonged and protracted process of modernization itself. There have been too many surprises, ironies, and exceptions to claim that changes were ever uniform, one-directional, or irreversible. Some aspects of old age have remained constant over time while others have changed. Trends within the elderly population (especially those related to blacks, women, and, at some points in history, possibly immigrants) have diverged considerably from the modal patterns of the population over sixty-five at any given moment. Therefore, cautions about modernization’s teleological implications definitely apply to the history of old age. The situation of the elderly simply has been too diverse and complex in preindustrial America and during subsequent phases of evolution to permit facile generalizations. Inevitably, older people’s circumstances improved in some aspects and deteriorated in others with the passage of time.

It is also important to note that the processes associated with modernization affected perceptions of elderly Americans’ worth in different ways and at different times than they altered the aged’s actual experiences. There has never been a revolutionary shift in the process of change since 1790. No period(s) or decade(s) looms as the transitional stage(s). Indeed, the occasional dysfunction between the rhetoric and realities of old age is one of the more striking motifs of my analysis. A basic discontinuity between prevailing images and the actual experiences of growing old remains an unfortunate feature in the current history of old age: most Americans still subscribe to negative conceptions of older people’s intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics that once seemed to make sense but that no longer have much basis in fact.

The place of the elderly in American society has changed along with those of other groups as the United States evolved, but certainly not in the same ways or for the same reasons. Older Americans sometimes proved quite successful in partially adapting to developments occurring in their midst while tenaciously clinging to traditional roles and arrangements. And although the aged were among the last to become “modern” in America, the present insights, demands, and efforts of older men and women attempting to enrich their lives may lead us all into the “postindustrial” era. It seems very likely that those who are, or shortly will be, over sixty-five will be among the first to experience widely forecasted developments. For instance, by pressing for flexible job schedules and demonstrating imaginative uses of retirement time, our elders can provide models for more healthful and sensible work-and-leisure arrangements throughout the life cycle. Indeed, as Americans increasingly comprehend that diminishing energy resources and unceasing international crises undoubtedly will force us significantly to reorder our priorities and alter our lifestyles, we should prepare to
follow the aged’s example and learn to make more out of less. If the human lifespan can be significantly extended through medical technology and genetic research, as some predict, then the current and following generations of older Americans will be the ones who will discover firsthand how the quality of later life improves and/or deteriorates in its prolonged form.

I believe, therefore, that scholars will find reformulated modernization models useful in studying the history of old age. They probably will be most pertinent in interpreting the aged’s relatively recent past, the implications of which will become more fully apparent in the proximate future. They should enhance analyses of changing perceptions of the immediate and cumulative impacts of broad-scale forces on the status and potential usefulness of old age. In addition, more sophisticated modernization models will permit researchers to evaluate the extent to which older persons themselves adapt(ed) deliberately or involuntarily, and adjust(ed) hesitantly or wholeheartedly to an ever changing world and world view. Applying insights from such studies will also enable investigators to describe and explain the dynamics of the age structure itself as it evolved in the United States. Ultimately, therefore, reconstructing the history of (old) age will reveal much about the long-term development of American culture and society itself.

Historians as Policy Analysts

Since the past shapes the present and affects the future, discussions of the meanings of history cannot be confined to the classroom or to professional gatherings. Historians need to join broader based efforts to create a reliable historical perspective with which to assess the elderly’s current conditions and on which to premise projections and expectations about the situation for older Americans in the years ahead. In particular, they must convince experts in other disciplines, policy makers, and legislators that the temporal aspects of all policy discussions and decisions affecting the aged are just as important as demographic, socioeconomic, political, and ideological considerations.

Creating policies to help and benefit the elderly, a group that has diverse and varying characteristics, requires far more than remedying existing deficiencies and satisfying present goals. Policies must also make sense in light of well-established patterns, current attitudes and practices, and anticipated trends. While it is humanly impossible to forecast with absolute certainty the next steps and major developments in the story of growing old in the United States, a historical understanding of the events and forces that have led to the aged’s present situation offers a fresh perspective worth utilizing as we seek to improve older Americans’ status and conditions.

The preceding analysis, in fact, suggests three points that policy makers should heed:
1. Precisely because older Americans' present conditions differ considerably from conditions in the past, we cannot assume that the elderly's situation will remain the same in the future as it is today. The aged's demographic and socioeconomic circumstances, ideas about old age's worth, and definitions of the nature and extent of old-age dependency have never been static and undoubtedly will continue to change in the future. Institutions to serve the elderly, which are products of the milieu in which they were created and amended, will also evolve in new and different ways. The future, in short, will not simply be the present writ large.

2. Generally speaking, therefore, we should continue to institute changes and implement reforms on an incremental basis. We should pay closer attention to anticipated short-range patterns than long-term predictions, since in all probability they are more accurate. We should recognize that we stand a far greater chance of attaining goals set for the immediate rather than the distant future. An incremental approach, in fact, has two advantages. On the one hand, we reduce the likelihood that, in scrapping one major program for another, we are destined to discover in untried approaches problems that are more pernicious than those found in existing measures. On the other hand, we maximize the possibility that some long-standing philosophies and methods, which currently have fallen into disfavor or disuse, might be revitalized without necessitating a radical readjustment in all other policies.

3. This does not mean, however, that a conservative stance in policy development is always the best course of action. We must accept the fact that major reforms are periodically necessary and ultimately constructive. The Depression experience forcibly reminds us, for instance, that our predecessors were willing to consider options they had once dismissed as unnecessary and un-American when a dramatic and unanticipated turn of events seemed to give them no other choice. We, too, must remain flexible and sensitive to important disjunctures in historical development and societal context. Under certain circumstances, novel approaches and unprecedented activities are the most feasible and desirable options. For regardless of the estimates we make and the hopes we espouse, unexpected crises or opportunities as well as limitations in both our current understanding of the aged and judgments about what should be done next may force us to adjust our priorities and policies at any moment.

Historians as Humanists

As we become more and more alert to temporal biases in the stated principles by which and the established manner in which we allocate services and resources to the elderly, we will find it increasingly necessary to evaluate the short-term efficacy and long-term impact of various old-age
programs in the most comprehensive framework possible. As I have shown, we must investigate the interplay of many diverse factors that impinge(d) on attitudes about growing old and determine(d) the aged’s environment. Above all, I think, we must examine and be honest about the fluid nature of value judgments that prevail(ed) in the United States concerning the aged’s worth and potential usefulness.

Needless to say, the relationships among human values, ethically bound social systems, and old age are difficult to investigate. But this does not diminish the importance and urgency of the task. Specialists in the humanities must inspire the humanist and nurture the humaneness in all of us. They must convince people that gerontology, for all of its technical jargon and arcane methodologies, is really the study of the opportunities and challenges associated with the last stages of human existence. Historians, as heirs to Clio, must do their part to convey this basic message and to shape the way in which it is presented. They must demonstrate that our perceptions of “reality” are products of the perennial paradoxes of growing old and the elderly’s eternal experiences, as well as the cultural tendencies, value systems, and structural forces pervading society at any given moment.

The historical record reveals that since 1790, our dominant conceptions of old age have neither faithfully mirrored the aged’s actual circumstances nor automatically shifted as new ideas arose and conditions changed. Rather, our ideas about the functions and overall worth of being old have a dynamics of their own, and thus exercise a significant—and often unanticipated and ironic—impact on our outlook and actions. For example, the comparatively favorable estimates of old people’s worth articulated before the Civil War cannot be dismissed as idealized sentiments simply because they may be compatible with the pious ruminations of ministers or prescriptions contrived by writers hoping to combat dangers and to control excesses they perceived in the infant republic. The intellectual origins of admonitions to heed the elderly’s wisdom or of recommendations to rely on their talents have deeper roots: acknowledging the aged’s value made sense because it meshed with the exigencies of nation building and the dominant beliefs of pre–Civil War America. Yet even in this milieu, there were divergent patterns of thought that did not accurately reflect older Americans’ “real” conditions. On the one hand, popular but sentimental images of old age ignored or glossed over the acute physical, psychological, and social problems of later years. On the other hand, the intense preoccupation with the tragedies of old age in a “romantic” impulse to heighten the presumed merit of living a long life appears, in retrospect, to have sown the seeds for less sanguine interpretations in the future.

In fact, one might plausibly argue that old age was not really as grim as some commentators claimed in the past. The growing belief that elderly
persons were becoming obsolescent after the Civil War appears to have been more of a response to new theories, events, and conditions transforming American culture and society at large than a function of significant shifts in the “objective” demographic and socioeconomic status of the aged, at least insofar as it can be reconstructed through census records and other statistical data. And even when changes in the elderly’s relative numbers and occupational and financial position did become more discernible, after World War I, it seems clear that writers sometimes misstated and exaggerated the trends occurring in their midst because of the intellectual paradigms and conventions, and social mores and expectations that shaped their perspective. Nevertheless, the extent to which reformers, scholars, government officials, the general public, and the elderly themselves perceived old age to be a “social problem” clearly influenced the nature of their response and the “solutions” they forged—as the initial and continued debates over Social Security and the “war on poverty” legislation, among other things, reveal.

Precisely because previously held judgments about the meanings and experiences of being old do shape current thinking, historians are not invariably seduced by present-mindedness when they join other humanistically oriented scholars in showing that some of our ideas have now become out of date and some of our methods have grown ineffective. The time is ripe, I think, for discarding the now inappropriate but still prevalent notion that older Americans are “problems” and for concentrating instead on the problems they have. Furthermore, if we are to reduce the likelihood of becoming victims of our own excessive sentimentality, sensitivity, or cynicism and pawns of institutional priorities or academic predilections, we must increase our number of experts in gerontology. The twentieth-century record indicates, in my opinion, that we can and must rely on the insights and resources of both the aging and the aged public. Yet, in offering these recommendations, I am keenly aware of the ways in which my own viewpoints are colored to some degree by the issues and vocabulary of the day: even historians must remember that their studies of old age become anachronistic in due course.

It is difficult to scrutinize our assumptions about old age; it is harder still to discard ones that we discover are wrong. It is often very painful or at least quite inconvenient to acknowledge that the values and the society in which we live are constantly changing, thereby ever forcing us to challenge prevailing verities and precedents and to rethink the way we perceive and deal with old age in this country. Yet it can be done if we hope to address the elderly’s real needs and desires instead of our own preconceptions. And it must be done if older Americans—and ultimately ourselves—are to have roles that ensure meaningful lives and dignity.