

Introduction

The initial idea for the volume *“Old Age between Personal Experience and Social Representation: from Enlightenment Thought to Modern Attitudes”* emerged from a research project¹ that addressed many issues related to ageing in the nineteenth century. Yet, as questions opened up regarding the heterogeneity of experiences of old age, differences in the position of women and men in later life, the vulnerability of the elderly in times of crisis, and the hidden ageism embedded in various social and cultural practices, the scope of inquiry expanded and acquired an additional unifying thread—one that numerous historians have highlighted in recent years. More than a decade ago, Lynn A. Botelho wrote: *“I want to argue that we need to make age, and particularly old age, a category of analysis in the study of history,”*² a view already articulated earlier by S. Ottaway.³ Today, (old) age is indeed becoming an important analytical category across various fields of the humanities.⁴

1 “Cultural-historical aspects of senescence: experiences, representations, identities”, co-funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

2 Botelho, Lynn A.: “Age and History as Categories of Analysis: Refiguring Old Age.” *Age Culture Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2014, 1, 199–208.

3 Ottaway, Susannah R.: *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

4 Čeč, Dragica: “Funkcije preživitka in družbena realnost preživitkarjev.” *Glasnik Slovenskega etnološkega društva*, 62, 2023, 2, 31–44; Keber, Katarina: “Ostareli v Ljubljani v 19. stoletju: mortaliteta na primeru Šempetrskega predmestja.” *Kronika: časopis za slovensko krajevno zgodovino*, 73, 2025, 2, 393–404; Bratož, Urška: “Podobe starosti v ljudski in uradni medicini 19. stoletja.” *Glasnik Slovenskega etnološkega društva*, 62, 2023, 2, 22–30; Bratož, Urška: Epidemija in ostareli: kolera in domet oskrbe v Avstrijskem Primorju. In: *Epidemije in zdravstvo: zgodovinski pogled* (Keber, Katarina, ed.). Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2024, 219–232. Čeč, Dragica: “Starostniki na podeželju v 19. stoletju”. *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino*, 64, 1, 142–160.

Questions of old age and ageing have in recent decades become one of the central research fields in the humanities and social sciences, yet the historical, sociological, literary, and iconographic dimensions of these processes remain fragmented and, in Slovene historiography, still significantly underexplored. The present volume brings these perspectives together in a multilayered narrative that reveals how diverse, contradictory, and culturally conditioned representations of old age were in the European context from the eighteenth century to the present, with particular emphasis on the territory of presentday Slovenia. The gradual increase in life expectancy toward the end of the eighteenth century also created the conditions for more heterogeneous experiences of ageing. Enlightenment thought revived the Ciceronian tradition of the “good old age of the Roman officer,” which became intertwined with the emerging ideal of the grandparent. The image of loving grandparents was skilfully integrated into new ideas about childrearing. At the same time, the ageing, declining, and desiccated body was partially freed from its earlier association with sin. The contributors to this volume demonstrate that old age was never a uniform category but rather a complex interplay of biological change, social expectations, moral norms, normative frameworks (especially inheritance practices and, later, retirement), economic conditions, and cultural representations.

If nineteenth-century bourgeois society lamented the loss of the supposedly self-sufficient and solidaristic multigenerational peasant households⁵—structures that were often more utopian ideal than historical reality—and in doing so overlooked the many social problems associated with ageing, contemporary society likewise tends to indulge in similarly utopian notions of a past in which the elderly were few and supposedly did not pose significant political, economic, or social challenges. The first historians to address the history of old age came primarily from three historiographical traditions. Demographic history focused on social structure and family forms or examined institutions, particularly social ones. Equally important was the study of the development of the welfare state and the history of institutions, which was partly connected to it. Within studies of representation, research on the relationship between death and old age, magic and old age, and religion and rites of passage (including rituals of

5 Troyansky, David: *Ageing in World History*. New York – London: Routledge, 2015.

the “good death”)⁶ occupied a central place. Anthropological and cultural interpretations of depictions of the life cycle revealed above all the ideology of intergenerational relations, yet they did not devote the same level of attention to ageing as a distinct life stage as they did to other periods of life.⁷ At the same time, scholarship placed strong emphasis on the study of the fluid social and cultural markers that defined the transition into old age—biological, chronological, and functional.⁸

Under the influence of the development of gerontology,⁹ particular attention has been devoted to the medical aspects of ageing in the past, to historical ideas of eternal youth and immortality, and less to the cultural representations of knowledge and experience in old age—representations closely connected to questions of authority, power, (social) status, lifestyle, and changes in occupation as work (and thus survival) adapted to the individual’s physical decline.¹⁰ With the cultural turn, increasing emphasis has been placed on sources that allow a bottom-up perspective: how people made use of the opportunities offered by social structures, institutions, cultural imaginaries, and rituals; how they perceived their own ageing and life course; how they shaped intergenerational relations and obligations; how they maintained or organised the transfer of property; and what kinds of relationships they preserved, transformed, or newly established within society. Given the plurality of relationships and the postmodern questioning of grand narratives, scholars ask how such complex narratives of old age can be understood and systematised at all. One possible approach lies in the three fields of analysis of ageing experiences promoted by contemporary

6 Thane, Pat (ed.): *The Long History of Old Age*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005; Troyansky, Aging in World History.

7 Greyerz, Kaspar von: *Passagen und Stationen: Lebensstufen zwischen Mittelalter und Moderne*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010.

8 Thane, Pat: “Social Histories of Old Age and Aging.” *Journal of Social History*, 37, 2003, 1, 93–111.

9 Higgs, Paul: Social and Cultural Gerontology and the Importance of the Ageing Body. In: *Old Age before Modernity: Case Studies and Methodological Perspectives, 500 BC–1700 AD* (Neumann, Christian Alexander, ed.). Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2023, 263–278.

10 Ehmer, Josef: Altersbilder im Spannungsfeld von Arbeit und Ruhestand. Historische und aktuelle Perspektiven. In: *Bilder des Alters im Wandel. Historische, interkulturelle, theoretische und aktuelle Perspektiven* (Ehmer Josef, Höffe, Otfried, eds.). Stuttgart: Wissenschaftliche Verlagsgesellschaft, 2009, 209–234; Ehmer, Josef: The “Life Stairs”: Aging, Generational Relations, and Small Commodity Production in Central Europe. In: *Aging and Generational Relations over the Life Course* (Hareven, Tamara, ed.). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996, 53–74.

gerontology, which focus on inclusion (intergenerational and work relations), wellbeing (ranging from property management and mere survival to social institutions), and the status of the individual.¹¹ To these, analyses of collective and individual emotions must certainly be added, as they significantly shape all three criteria. To be old and poor was a fate to be feared and a state to be avoided.

Historical studies have confirmed that certain biological and physical characteristics of the ageing body have manifested between the ages of sixty and seventy for several centuries, while in some individuals—due to genetic and environmental factors and the nature of their work—these changes appeared somewhat earlier. Some contributions¹² point out that both nineteenth-century bourgeois society and contemporary society have required the elderly in the organisation of family and individual life, while they have also been valued for their economic power, experience, social networks, and the influence that followed from these. For a very long time, as bearers of memory, they played an important role in the legal and economic relations of the community as a whole. At the same time, society enveloped this age group in an entire arsenal of stereotypes that could significantly affect an individual's position within society and the community, their relationships, self-representations, and ultimately their life and often even their survival.¹³ These stereotypes and cultural practices reveal deeply rooted collective fears associated with one's own decline and powerlessness, which also shape ambivalent attitudes toward intergenerational and other forms of solidarity—attitudes that, under the influence of the French Enlightenment, shifted from ideals of religious charity toward ideals of the social good.¹⁴ They are also linked to centuries old beliefs that the sight of a damaged or deformed body could affect the health of the “healthy,” to attitudes toward the ageing body, which, in the Augustinian sense, represented a symbol of worldliness, sin, and decay, and to understandings

11 Johnson, Paul: Historical Readings of Old Age and Ageing. In: *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity* (Johnson, Paul, Thane, Pat, eds.). London – New York: Routledge, 1998, 1–18.

12 F.e. Čeč, “Funkcije preživitka”; Bratož, “Podobe starosti”.

13 Thane, *The Long History of Old Age*.

14 Čeč, Dragica: “Srce vsakega je treba pripraviti za dejavno udeležanje zapovedi ljubezni do bližnjega”: Začetki sistemske oskrbe revnih in pomen kulture osebne dobrotelčnosti. In: *Pomisli na jutri: o zgodovini (samo)odgovornosti* (Studen, Andrej, ed.). Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2012, 37–70.

of the boundary between this world and the next, and of those who were perceived as closer to that boundary. From the late eighteenth century onward, the ageing process became increasingly concealed and pushed aside through the medicalisation of life, through social isolation and confinement within total institutions, through social marginalisation, and through ideas of progress and self-responsibility. At the same time, new images emerged of the “iron” elderly—those who, until their final days, actively resisted the inexorable mechanisms of biological decline.¹⁵ The power of the elderly within the family and household peaked and waned in relation to the structure of living arrangements and was far from a fixed institution of family life.¹⁶

Nineteenth-century bourgeois society developed its own behavioural code, while political and economic changes highlighted the ways in which certain social groups identified with a particular period and age cohort (generation). Within this framework, specific values played a central role—values closely tied to old age and to the bourgeois understanding of it. Old age stood in a particularly strong relationship to key bourgeois ideals such as progress and a focus on work, rationality, and attitudes toward the body and health. These values could function as instruments of social control and discipline, while the bourgeoisie, in its dominant position, simultaneously created and transmitted certain stereotypical—often negative—images of old age. Enlightenment commitments to reason and empirical inquiry shaped bourgeois attitudes toward medicine, technology, and other aspects of everyday life. This produced various imaginaries of ageing that were linked to the treatment and politics of one’s own and other social groups (from the perspective of dominant classes, especially in relation to workers or rural populations). In the bourgeois code, old age—particularly among the lower social strata—was often equated with poverty and labelled as “problematic,” marked by a wide range of negative connotations: as a threat to social order, public health, and morality, and as a source of numerous stereotypes and forms of age-based discrimination. At the

15 Makarovič, Marija: “Kultura na vasi in njena vloga v razvoju podeželja.” *Glasnik Slovenskega etnološkega društva*, 34, 1994, 4, 25; Fevert, Ute: *Emotions in History – Lost and Found*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011.

16 Botelho, A. Lynn: The 17th century. In: *The Long History of Old Age* (Thane, Pat, ed.). London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, 153.

same time, different—and at times diametrically opposed—imaginaries and stereotypes of ageing and the elderly could be shaped by other identities of the ageing individual. Alongside gender as a central category, family, professional, political, religious, and other identities also played a role, and contributors may well address these dimensions. In the nineteenth century, such identities could influence even more strongly than later the reevaluation of the relationships between chronological, functional, and biological understandings of old age. A distinct field is formed by the imaginaries of old age in political discourse. As tradition and heritage, old age served as an important point of identification in the construction of national identity—one of the key bourgeois identities—while at the same time it could be perceived as a major obstacle to progress. Finally, it is necessary to address what has been overlooked, concealed, or silenced—dimensions that are all the more important in the context of the social stigmatisation of old age.

Although it is generally assumed that a person retained their social status as long as they remained (professionally and functionally) active, this was not a universal rule. One notable exception were certain widows, especially wealthier ones. The diary of the Swiss woman Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, analysed in Selina Bentsch's contribution, reveals how an older woman around 1800 could, despite social expectations of withdrawal into privacy, develop her own strategies for maintaining social inclusion, usefulness, and personal selffulfilment. Her notes expose the tension between the norms of bourgeois society and individual attempts to turn old age into a space of autonomy, social prestige, and proactive engagement rather than mere retreat—an issue closely connected in this period with the emerging acceptance of the idea of retirement. Similarly, individual life stories drawn from other types of sources (for example, in the context of poor relief) show the highly diverse experiences of old age among the most marginalised individuals. These cases demonstrate that old age was not a

uniform or predictable life stage but one shaped by social position, economic resources, institutional frameworks, and personal agency.¹⁷

The contribution by Dragica Čeč seeks to uncover the complexity of experiences of old age within one of the most marginalised, yet, due to the recording of life stories and their administrative handling, highly revealing groups. Among the recipients of poor relief—the most widespread form of assistance to the poor—in the regional centre of Ljubljana in the first half of the nineteenth century, the majority were elderly, frail, or very old individuals. As in other contexts, a strong preference to remain in an independent household (most often as lodgers) clearly emerges. At the same time, the findings confirm the hypothesis that a persistent belief continued to shape attitudes toward care: namely, that those who required care were only the *very old*, the *old and very poor*, or the *old and infirm*.¹⁸

The contributions also indicate that understandings of old age in the past were deeply embedded in discourses on health and the prolongation of life. As Filip Draženović shows, eighteenth-century British health manuals (and similar trends existed elsewhere)¹⁹ treated old age as a natural and inevitable condition that could be managed primarily through moderation, self-discipline, and moral virtue—in short, through a specific lifestyle. Yet this ideal was difficult to attain for less affluent elderly people, for whom such manuals were not even intended.

The history of old age in the nineteenth century reveals yet another important dimension: old age as an economic and social burden. Not only in the Austrian Littoral, the southwestern part of the Austrian Monarchy (as shown in the contribution of Urška Bratož), but also in many other

17 Čeč, Dragica: Podobe starosti v začetku 19. stoletja. In: *Starost – izživi historičnega raziskovanja* (Šorn, Mojca, ed.). Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2017, 11–33; Bratož, Urška: Staro telo: medicinski pogled 19. stoletja. In: *10. Istarski povijesni biennale: Corpus, Carnalitas – o tijelu i tjelesnosti u povijesti na jadranskom prostoru: zbornik radova s međunarodnog znanstvenog skupa*, sv. 10. (Mogorović Crljenko, Marija, Uljančić-Vekić, Elena, eds.). Poreč: Zavičajni muzej Poreštine, Pula: Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile, Filozofski fakultet, Pazin: Državni arhiv, 2023, 102–114.

18 Troyansky, David: The 18th Century. In: *The Long History of Old Age* (Thane, Pat, ed.). London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, 176.

19 Remec, Meta: "Živeti dolgo ali živeti srečno?" Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland in njegov vpliv na dožemanje starosti in staranja v dolgem 19. stoletju." *Glasnik Slovenskega etnološkega društva*, 6, 2023, 2, 7–21; Remec, Meta: "Kako postanemo stari?": hrepenenje po mladosti, zdravju in dolgem življenju v 19. in 20. stoletju." *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino*, 64, 2024, 1, 161–183.

regions, old age was frequently associated with poverty and dependence on family or social institutions. Such dependence often stemmed from an inability to work and from physical frailty, which could itself be the result of long years of strenuous physical labour. All of this shaped perceptions and stereotypes of old age, yet it did not lead to systematic measures to address social deprivation in later life.²⁰

Otto Gerdina, in his contribution—which offers a tool for examining ageism across historical periods—presents the forms through which ageism manifests itself via different types of stereotypical content. Although these models cannot be directly applied to the past, understanding them can serve as a useful lens for observing historical attitudes toward old age.

Visual representations of old age likewise reveal the diverse meanings that society attributed to ageing. Frail elderly figures of both sexes were a common motif in sentimental painting, yet in the oeuvre of Ivana Kobilca (especially from the 1880s and 1890s), analysed by Tomislav Vignjević, we find an exceptional series of studies of older people that, in their psychological depth and realistic treatment, differ markedly from the sentimental or anecdotal depictions characteristic of nineteenth-century Slovene art and widespread in Europe from the eighteenth century onward. Kobilca's works do not idealise old age; rather, through painted faces that reflect the stories of past lives, they present it as a profoundly human and individualised experience while preserving the dignity of the person portrayed.

Cultural narratives of old age also emerge clearly in literature. Urša Marinšek's analysis of three contemporary Slovene novels set in residential care homes shows how literary representations intertwine narratives of decline, burden, and resistance to ageing. These narratives do not merely shape fictional worlds; they also influence broader social understandings of institutional care and the position of older people in today's society.

20 Čeč, Dragica: "Donacije Janeza Nepomuka Kalistra – tržaškega 'self-made mana' - in njegove vdove Marije v meščanski kulturi darovanja." *Annales. Series historia et sociologia*, 33, 2023, 1, 101–124; Čeč, Dragica: "Revni - ostareli v času kriz: družba na dlani." *Arhivi: glasilo Arhivskega društva in arhivov Slovenije*, 43, 2020, 2, 307–329.

A common thread running through all contributions in this volume is the recognition that old age is not a biological fact but a culturally and socially constructed category that is continually reshaped over time, and that perceptions and representations of old age and ageing are plural and heterogeneous. The volume ultimately opens a space for reflecting on how past conceptions of old age have shaped contemporary understandings of ageing—and how a historical perspective can contribute to a more inclusive and less stereotypical treatment of older people in contemporary society.

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