

# Time in Late Modern Ageing

Jan Baars

## Abstract

Human ageing is basically living in time. Therefore, the ways in which ageing is approached are strongly influenced by interpretations of what it is to live in time. Such interpretations are saturated with cultural meanings. The chronological (or rather, chronometric) concept of time that has become dominant in late modern societies appears to be purely instrumental and neutral. As such it not only obscures other forms of temporal orientations that are vital to understand ageing processes, but allows all kinds of cultural meanings (from ageist prejudice to political programs) to creep in, hiding behind the scientific prestige of statistics and exact measurements of people's ages.

**Key Words: Time, temporality, chronological time, chronological age, chronometric time, acceleration, late modernity, culture, instrumentalism, paradoxes of the younger older**

Human ageing always takes place in time and in particular cultures. This basic acknowledgement implies that both '*culture*' and '*time*' are concepts that are fundamental for any study of ageing, requiring cultural and temporal reflexivity in scholarly approaches to the subject. Although we may accept that any definition of '*culture*' or '*time*' will be embedded in a particular culture, even the acknowledgment that all cultures are different presupposes a general concept of culture, otherwise we would not know what to compare. Moreover, time and culture presuppose each other: each culture originates and changes in time, and cultures influence the ways in which concepts, theories, metaphors or practices regarding time are articulated. Before we can do anything, we are already *living* (in) culture and (in) time. This does not mean that it would be futile to try to clarify what '*culture*' or '*time*' might be, but we have to be aware that there will always remain a certain blindness regarding our own position because we cannot see our own eyes, as Wittgenstein (1974, 5.633) remarked. In theories of cultures this is hardly an irrelevant academic observation as examples of ethnocentrism have been abundant; the tendency to see what we have been accustomed to as '*normal*' and anything deviant as '*abnormal*' or even '*unnatural*' has left its destructive traces throughout

history (Fabian 1983). As we will see, seemingly self-evident cultural orientations can have important implications for ageing persons.

**Time: from meaningful to instrumental.**

The articulation of ‘time’ must have begun with the experience of change, especially with change that is seen as beyond human control. One aspect that must have been noticed very early, is that some changes show a certain regularity so that, although it is not possible to influence them, you can *count* on them and use this knowledge to coordinate activities with these recurrent patterns. In so far as the aim is to influence or at least predict processes, there will be a primary interest in discovering *regularity*. The observation that the seasons follow a more or less regular local pattern makes it possible, for instance, to anticipate periods of dryness or cold. The elementary discovery of regular change forms the origin of the clock time that can be found in ancient civilizations: Egyptian, Babylonian, Chinese, Indian, Greek, Maya or Aztec (Blackburn & Holford-Stevens 1999). In spite of important technical developments, clock time remains grounded in regular changes or movements in nature; early historical examples are the rhythms of the celestial bodies. Even the most advanced atomic clocks are still based on the natural rhythms of atomic oscillations.

The historical continuities regarding the development of clock time from its pre-modern origins to post-Newtonian science should, however, not obscure the fact that time has always been saturated with meaningful interpretations of the world: its eras, ages or stages. Similarly, the experience that generations come and go, not only led to interpretations of the meanings of birth, reproduction and death but also to cultural narratives and images regarding the identity of life’s stages. Often, the imagery of European seasons has been projected onto the life course but we can also find astrologically inspired phases such as Ptolemy’s interpretation of the influence of the planets on the phases of the life course (Sears 1986; Burrows 1986). Such interpretations refer to the movements of the heavenly bodies, but in the context of a spiritually meaningful universe. In some cultures, stages of life are more directly characterized by *spiritual* cycles. In the Vedic scriptures of Hindu culture the cycle of life is seen as a process of duty and rebirth. The first stage (*Brahmacharya*) is a phase of education and preparation, the second (*Grihastha*) a phase of raising and caring for a family, whereas the third phase (*Vanaprastha*), arrives when the children themselves have reached the second phase. It is a time of religious service in which the parents are beginning to take distance from

family life in order to prepare themselves for the last phase (*Sannyasa*) of spiritual resignation (Flood 2003).

The idea that human lives might repeat certain essential patterns does not chime well with modern ideas of individualization. Indeed the instrumental character of modern chronological time has given room to the idea that every life is unique, and that age is merely the product of neutral measurement. However, more or less articulate concepts or narratives tend to fuse with these measurements, suggesting that ages still embody some kind of natural or cultural logic. In this chapter the term *chronometric* time is used instead to underline that this form of time is solely one of measurement, although forms of cultural *meaning* tend to creep in and become fused with it.

### **Cultural specificity: ageing from left to right?**

It might seem that time has become a value-free medium of calculation and that the measurement of time or ageing has been cleansed of all superfluous, inefficient elements. That would not be entirely adequate. True, chronometric time is merely instrumental and might be used to measure anything; but this abstract and empty character also implies that its measurements can only become informative if theories or narratives have established what would be important to measure and why. Measurement is undertaken for a purpose and has practical consequences. At all of these levels, cultural orientations can play an important role although, they tend to remain implicit.

That this may even apply to unsuspected dimensions of our cultural orientations can be demonstrated by results from experiments by Fuhrman and Boroditsky (2010). In one of their experiments they asked Hebrew and English speakers to arrange pictures depicting temporal sequences of natural events. The result was that Hebrew speakers would arrange a temporal sequence from right to left, and English speakers from left to right, showing how the direction in which these languages are written and read determines the spatial representation of time. Indeed, in Jewish representations of the stages of life, the stairs rise and fall from right to the left. The fact that we tend to take for granted how graphic representations of time or ages are constructed from left to right functions as a warning sign of how cultural prejudice or preoccupation may run deeper than we might expect.

It can be expected that in ageing studies many cultural elements will co-constitute its outcomes, although we may think that these cultural specifics are actually normal or logically connected with living in time. Although ageing processes do not operate in accordance with chronometric age, many people still regard turning 50 or 80 as a meaningful mile stone on the road of their lives (Bytheway 2011). However, this presupposes a culture that emphasizes decimal accounts of time. In regions where the general conditions of life are much harder than in Western societies, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, the decline of bodily functions plays a more central role in the understanding of ageing (Aboderin 2010). Moreover, many do not even know their age as they usually work outside the formal sector which might grant them age-related retirement rights (Lloyd-Sherlock 2010). Gorman (1999, p. 20) concludes in an overview of the rights of older people in developing countries that, ‘in contrast to the chronological milestones which mark life stages in the developed world, old age in developing countries is seen to begin at a point when active contribution is no longer possible’. This reminds one of Thane’s (2005) observation concerning the history of old age in Western countries, that definitions of who would be seen as ‘old’ and when ‘old age would have arrived, have for a long time been more dependent on the appearance and physical capacities of individuals than on their age. Although the relation between chronometric age and processes of retirement, which have tended to define who had entered ‘old age’, has been loosened over the last decades, this does not mean that chronometric time has ceased to play an important role in ageing processes. Measurement of somebody’s age and of the duration of (un)employment still plays a major role in late modern societies. Such details are entered in the many databases of late modern society, and have important consequences for individual’s lives and entitlements.

Although chronometric time remains of major importance and cannot be replaced by other forms of time, it should also not replace other temporal orientations. In this context they can only be mentioned briefly (but see Baars 2012b). *First* of all, the ways in which the passing of time is experienced is independent from the regularity of the ticking clock. Even its experienced length, as long or short, an aspect that is closest to chronometric time, has more to do with the nature of a particular situation or activity such as waiting or enjoyment than with the precise duration. *Secondly*, the chronometric concept of ‘the present’ is nothing more than rapidly moving numbers of the digital clock. To be able to understand that we can speak of ‘a present situation’ or even to listen to somebody ‘in the present’, instead of hearing unrelated acoustic fragments that are uttered at different points of time, we need another

concept of time and temporal presence. *Thirdly*, memories have their own temporal dimensions. Although remembered situations may be dated, their vividness is not determined by chronometric time: something that happened fifty years ago can be more vividly remembered than something that happened last summer. *Finally*, chronometric time is embedded in cultural narratives such as calendars. Depending on whether the years are counted according to the Christian, Muslim, Jewish or Buddhist calendar, they have a different number which relates to an inaugurating singular event in the past which functions as a zero point which anchors chronometric time. Such general calendars are enriched with national, regional and personal calendars that give meaningful structure and temporal orientation to the abstract points of time of a chronometric continuum.

Processes of ageing, senescing or finitude deserve a broader and deeper temporal understanding than chronometric time allows. This form of time is just one, indispensable but rather overemphasized element in understanding the time that is implicit in processes of ageing. In the following sections some consequences of the cultural dominance of chronometric age will be highlighted.

### **The cultural affinities of chronometric time**

The quantitative nature of chronometric time makes it eminently suitable to be used in assessments of durations or in constructing time-tables for the coordination of events or activities, but it becomes problematic as soon as its limitations are not acknowledged or if chronometric time is seen as the only form of time that would be 'real' or should be taken seriously. Four interrelated aspects of chronometric time deserve to be discussed as they have major consequences for experiences and situations that ageing people are confronted with. *First*, the quantitative nature of chronometric time lends itself very well for the purposes of *age related generalizations* which play a major role in late modern societies where all kinds of reports, diagnoses and planning prospects use statistics as the main scientific instrument to convince their audiences. Although proper statistical research requires precisely defined concepts and specific hypotheses while the conclusions should be held in check by theoretical interpretation and statistical tools such as standard deviations, their applications in policies or public debates are usually not as subtle. Bureaucratic categories are not merely instrumental or neutral in their cultural effects: they suggest that age groups are homogeneous in themselves but different from each other and are, therefore, easily connected with prejudice about people within certain ages. Information about ageing based on 'normal distributions', or

‘average results’ can be useful in some contexts but lead away from the growing diversity of people as they age, although this is one of the most striking results of longitudinal ageing studies, unless people with the same ages have been put in similar situations through age related policies (Baars 2010).

A *second* aspect of chronometric time is its easy use in *cost calculations* which underline the tendency to see ageing in late modern society primarily under budgetary aspects. Although human ageing raises many profound questions, these tend to be dominated or silenced by calculations of the *costs* that are involved, for instance regarding care arrangements or pensions. (Baars 2012 a). In this conjunction of time and money, time becomes a commodity that can be lost, well spent, saved, wasted, given, spare or gained and the costs of an hour’s work or even an extra year of quality-life (QALY) have become a matter of precise calculation.

A *third* aspect of chronometric time is its practical convenience in large scale planning. It helps to construct overviews of populations in terms of age categories that can be manipulated along projected time lines. Ages of populations, projected costs of their (future) characteristics or needs, durations of interventions, time lines of policies and their implementations can be clearly projected in chronometric models. Although projections that pretend to grasp developments over several decennia have often turned out to be dramatically unreliable, such models tend to become a reality of their own, restricting the possibilities to think and act creatively in the present.

A *fourth* aspect of chronometric time, that will be discussed more elaborately below, is its affinity with the *acceleration* of processes and activities, especially in central domains of society such as education, material production, technology, science or the media (Virilio 2012). The ability to ‘gain time’ has become an important quality of new products and the awareness of the duration of daily activities such as cooking, or rather heating a particular meal in the microwave, is becoming increasingly exact and tightly related to other activities so that more activities can take place in the same amount of time.

### **Ageing in a culture of acceleration**

In late modern culture chronometric time unfolds its peculiar dynamics as an instrument of bureaucratic planning and late modern consumerist culture (Baars 2006). One of the macro-

narratives behind chronometric practices is an idealization of speeding up the obsolescence of technological generations and creating a general climate of intolerance toward anything or anybody that is too slow, from 3G internet connections to slow frail or handicapped people getting in and out of public transport. The general message is that whoever fails to join in this general acceleration will be left behind and be considered too slow or too old: there can be no acceleration without surpassing others who are slower (Bauman 2000). In response to these developments, there has sometimes been an idealization of slowness, as in recent movements of slow food (Jones 2003), slow living (Parkins 2004) or slow cities (Knox 2005). However, both idealizations disregard the importance of *specific* situations: in case of emergencies acceleration still makes sense. The idealization of acceleration, however, tends to turn every situation into an emergency; it neglects that there are different forms of temporality and that different situations, activities, or forms of receptivity require appropriate temporal forms or attitudes. Even in emergencies the temporality of rushing people to places where they can be helped is different from the temporality of interpersonal contact and communication that are also badly needed in such situations.

A general cultural acceleration, however, speeds up not only the senescence of smart phones, cars, computers or workers but also the cultural senescence of adults. The culture of a rapid succession of technological generations has profound implications for intergenerational relationships: in a society that is tuned to competitive technological innovation, ageing persons encounter new threats to their status during unprecedented longer lives that have partly become possible through the same technological advances. Whereas throughout history, young children have been introduced by their parents or other older persons to the proper use of tools, in late modern society such instructions are often given by the younger to the older. Many (grand)parents have experienced that their (grand)children are much more advanced in the use of computers and that they have to turn to them for advice.

There is a general cultural premium on what is new or young, regardless of its qualities, although it will be old tomorrow. In its continuous restructuring of activities and processes in terms of measured *durations*, the late modern culture of acceleration forces individuals to develop a calculating, planning, and pressurizing attitude toward their lives.

On the one hand, late modern society improves general circumstances, resulting in rising life expectancies--at least for the majority of those who live in the Western countries. But on the other hand they are defined as 'older' many years before their official retirement ages. In the

1950s and 1960s it was customary to speak of a beginning of ‘old age’ when the official retirement age (usually around 65 years) had been reached. But nowadays, persons who have lived for fifty years are already invited to join organizations such as *AARP*, the ‘American Association of *Retired* Persons’, or one of the many national organizations that are active in the member states of the European Union. A wide range of organizations such as the *Red Hat Society* promise to support the sudden weakening of the ‘aged’ with age-specific benefits and pleasures that may partly compensate for the negative effects of the age-related segregation they paradoxically emphasize. In a crucial domain such as the labor market adults may already be labeled as ‘older workers’ when they are older than forty years with serious implications, especially if they become unemployed.

Children and adolescents have probably always considered the generation of their parents as ‘old’ (with positive or negative connotations), but now such youth-centered prejudices have become widely accepted. The meaning of age as lived time has been redefined in the context of a youth culture which fears, hides and accelerates ageing, although this early senescence does not make sense within the same logic of age generalizations as life expectancies have been rising. This leads to what Baars terms the *first paradox of the younger older*: living longer but being called ‘old’ at an earlier age (Baars 2012 b, 2010). This paradox is also striking in quantitative terms: the phase of life in which one is considered to be ‘old’ (possibly until the age of a hundred years or more) may almost be twice as long as the phase during which one is seen as a ‘normal adult’. As ageing persons have their own experiences of ageing as living in time, they may not accept this depreciation and early exclusion. However, they predominantly identify with the aggressor, developing defensive strategies that could be typified as *ageing well by staying young*, with all its inherent tensions and, possibly, contradictions. The first paradox of the ‘younger older’-- living longer but being regarded as old at an earlier age--has been an excellent breeding ground for the commercial development of new ways of ageing that are actually ways to present yourself as ‘still young.’ This leads to the *second paradox of the younger older*: getting older but staying young.

One may think that the acceleration of society will not bother older people, once they have been sidelined. And, indeed, as soon as their working lives are over they can distance themselves from time pressures and create their own temporal rhythms. But being a pensioner does not mean that one can step outside society; the general acceleration may make itself felt in many ways. Transportation schedules, bureaucratic arrangements, fiscal regimes and



pension schemes may suddenly change and continue to change, requiring continuing alertness and assertiveness that conflicts with traditional images of a carefree, tranquil life in 'old age'. And if older persons need professional care, at home or in an institution, it will become clear that caring time is becoming an increasingly scarce commodity.

In managerial approaches to care chronometric time plays an important role as it is typically used to measure events or processes to see whether they could be less time-consuming ('cheaper *and* better'). Such a restructuring of processes and situations from a chronometric perspective may have several important consequences for persons who are dependent on long-term care or home care. Time budgets in care giving present a major example of these developments. There is a crucial transition from measuring the durations of particular conversations or acts of care and establishing that these activities take an average of 5 or 9 minutes, to regulations that specify that a conversation or a specific act of care *may not exceed* a precise amount of time. The dominant position of chronometric time in institutional care has been documented in research (Diamond 1992, Gubrium 1975). Henderson (1995) has called it a 'cult of time and task' in which care becomes organized in routines that are structured by clock time and lack situational flexibility. Consequently, professionals as well as clients may suffer from the contrast they experience between their professional and personal concerns on the one hand and the pressures of time-efficient care on the other hand. If instrumental approaches are not embedded in forms of life which acknowledge different time perspectives, they can become a threat to good care rather than an improvement.

### **Conclusion: a chronometric reduction of ageing as living in time**

Approaching ageing from the instrumental perspective of chronometric time implies that more meaningful aspects of ageing are disappearing from sight or become irrelevant. The technological cult of acceleration demands a high price: loss of the idea that older persons might have learned something during their lives that might also be important for younger persons. This used to be called life experience, or wisdom (Sternberg 1990, Assmann 1994).

Chronometric time may seem to be neutral, but its cultural prestige tends to distort the temporal dimensions of human life as these are narrowed to this measurable dimension. It may seem as if we would lose as little time as possible when we keep our eyes on the clock, but actually we will lose all time except for the stress of chronometric time. In spite of their unpleasant effects, the pressures of time limits are broadly accepted and even seem to have a

certain appeal because they are associated with popular cultural macro-narratives that connect acceleration with progress (as if this cannot have a destructive side), youthfulness (as if this commercial image would be the only way to live well), dynamic life (as if serenity, contemplation, and time for each other have lost their meaning) and a short lived idealization of the last hype. The flip side of much acceleration is waste: meaningful cultural heritage is easily debunked as old-fashioned things of the past, together with yesterday's newest gadget. It may take some ageing, at least some deepening of life experience, to see that much of what is presented as 'new' amounts to 'more of the same' and to make meaningful distinctions. There is a need for a broader and deeper understanding of what it is to live *in time*, and from that understanding, to begin to develop an inspiring and supportive culture of ageing (Baars 2012 b).

## References

- Aboderin, I. (2010) 'Global Ageing: Perspective from Sub-Saharan Africa' In D. Dannefer & C. Phillipson (eds.) *International Handbook of Social Gerontology*. New York-London: SAGE Publishers, pp. 405-419.
- Assmann (1994). 'Wholesome knowledge: Concepts of wisdom in a historical and cross-cultural perspective'. In D. L. Featherman, R. M. Lerner, & M. Perlmutter (Eds.), *Life-span development and behavior* (Vol. 12, pp. 187–224). Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Baars, J. (2012a) 'Critical turns of ageing, narrative and time.' *International Journal of Ageing and Late Life*, 7: 143-165.
- Baars, J. (2012b). *Ageing and the Art of Living*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press
- Baars, J. (2010). Time and Ageing: Enduring and Emerging Issues. In D. Dannefer & C. Phillipson (eds.) *International Handbook of Social Gerontology*. New York-London: SAGE Publishers, pp. 367 – 376.
- Baars, J. (2006). 'Beyond Neo-Modernism, Anti-Modernism, and Post-Modernism: Basic Categories for Contemporary Critical Gerontology.' In *Ageing, Globalization, and Inequality: The New Critical Gerontology*, ed. J. Baars, D. Dannefer, C. Phillipson, and A. Walker, Amityville, NY: Baywood, pp. 17-42, Bauman, Z. (2000). Time and space reunited. *Time and Society* 9 (2-3), pp. 171-85.
- Blackburn, B. and L. Holford-Stevens (eds.) (1999) *The Oxford Companion to the Year: An Exploration of Calendar Customs and Time-Reckoning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press,.

- Burrow, J. A. (1986). *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bytheway, B. (2011) *Unmasking Age. The significance of age for social research*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Diamond, T. (1992). *Making Gray Gold: Narratives of Nursing Home Care*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fabian, Johannes. (1983). *Time and the other: how anthropology makes its object*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Flood, G. (Ed.) (2003) *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Fuhrman, O. & L. Boroditsky (2010) 'Cross-Cultural Differences in Mental Representations of Time: Evidence From an Implicit Nonlinguistic Task', *Cognitive Science* 34, pp. 1430-1451.
- Gorman M. (1999) Development and the rights of older people. In: Randel J, et al., eds. *The ageing and development report: poverty, independence and the world's older people*. London: Earthscan Publications Ltd, pp.3-21.
- Gubrium, J. F. (1975). *Living and Dying at Murray Manor*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Henderson, J. N. (1995). 'The Culture of Care in a Nursing Home: Effects of a Medicalized Model of Long-term Care.' In *The Culture of Long-term Care: Nursing Home Ethnography*, ed. J. N. H. M. D. Vesperi, Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, pp. 37-54.
- Jones, P. et al (2003) 'Return to traditional values? A case study of Slow Food', *British Food Journal*, Vol. 105, pp. 297 – 304
- Knox, P.L. (2005) 'Creating Ordinary Places: Slow Cities in a Fast World' *Journal of Urban Design*, pp. 1-11
- Lloyd-Sherlock, P. 2010 'Ageing and International Development', *International Handbook of Social Gerontology*, ed. D. Dannefer and C. Phillipson, New York: SAGE, pp. 379-388.
- Parkins, W. (2004) 'Out of Time. Fast Subjects and Slow Living', *Time & Society*, 363-382
- Sears, E. 1986. *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sternberg, R. J., ed. 1990. *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Thane, P., ed. 2005. *A History of Old Age*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Virilio, P. (2012) *The Great Accelerator*. Oxford: Polity.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1974). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. New York: Routledge.

Jan Baars is Professor of Interpretive Gerontology at the University for Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, The Netherlands ([www.janbaars.nl](http://www.janbaars.nl)). He focuses on basic concepts that are implicit in theoretical and practical approaches to ageing. He has written extensively on Critical Gerontology and concepts of time and temporality in ageing. His publications include *Ageing and the Art of Living* (2012), and co-edited volumes such as *Ageing, Meaning and Social Structure* (2013), *Ageing and Time* (2007), and *Ageing, Globalization and Inequality. The new Critical Gerontology* (2006).