EDITORIAL

In the first, double issue of **The European Journal of Social Quality**, the concept of social quality was explored from a variety of perspectives, as work in progress. Continuing this endeavour, this issue focuses on 'Age and Autonomy'. These terms are offered as starting points rather than taken for granted concepts. The discussion of the themes of independence, dependence, and interdependence in the first issue continues here with a focus on a topic which is on the political agenda throughout Europe, North America, and elsewhere: demographic changes. Increases in life expectancy and decreases in birth rates in many countries, changes – often different for men and women – in the proportion of the life cycle in formal paid work, and the longer, more active period of older age contemplated by large numbers of people are major social challenges. With regard to older people, increased activity and participation as well as the need for support and care are aspects of a complex picture that are often obscured in political debate.

Yet this neglect of social complexity is not just the fault of politicians. Opening up new horizons on the project of European integration to incorporate not only individual well being but social justice, participation and inclusion implies critical consideration of the concepts with which social, economic, and political realities are analysed and policy programmes developed. If social and economic policies are to respond to widespread popular needs rather than presumed global inevitabilities, a strategy needs to be developed based on shaping global change in a progressive direction instead of simply reacting to ongoing trends. A pre-requisite for contributing constructively to such a strategy is critical reflection about both the tools of analysis and the ways in which different disciplinary frameworks relate to each other in order to improve the quality of knowledge. Such critical reflection implies in turn escaping from oversimplified dichotomies, for example, between economic and social policy or between so-called American and European models. As Henry R. Huttenbach argues in the **Forum** piece in this issue, the United States is a special case, and yet something can be learnt from the U.S. about the need for a vibrant European civil society if the future of Europe is to be determined democratically and not by self-serving elites.

Learning can cross the Atlantic. A difference should be made, however, between knowledge that has force because of the global weight of the United States and its academic community and knowledge that is derived from thoughtful consideration of good practice. There are indeed lessons to be learned from good practice in the United States, or Southern Europe, or elsewhere in the world. No region has a monopoly of wisdom.

In engaging with complex social realities, the ability to transcend historical, institutional, and cultural specificities in order to go beyond the limits of national or regional experiences is fundamental, not least to de-naturalise what has over time come to seem natural. Ideas from different countries and regions become practical and useful to the extent that they are translated rather than copied mechanically. A lack of such reflective, critical openness to useful ideas, whatever the source, undermines the possibility of arriving at advanced, progressive solutions that are suitable for different contexts.

Articles in this issue engage with experiences and literature from the Netherlands, the U.K., the U.S. and elsewhere. They do so from different disciplinary perspectives ranging from philosophy to sociology and gerontology to literature and design. Cross-fertilisation between different ways of analyzing social and individual realities and the relationship between them can help social analysis and policy development to stay in touch with the variety and depth of human experience. It also helps to test conclusions reached through different routes, and is the pre-condition for a project that puts social quality at the centre of European concerns.

If social quality implies giving analytical primacy to social experience, as argued in the editorial in the first double issue, there remains the question of the relation between general processes and personal experience, a classic issue in Western thought, as Jan Baars explains in 'Time, Age and Autonomy'. Baars examines how concepts of time, chronological or subjective, often presupposed in considering age and ageing, have been thought about in the Western tradition. 'Human ageing,' he writes, 'means living in dimensions of time where impersonal forces and regularities clash with personal meanings.' The resulting conflicts are regulated in the social domain. He concludes that attempts to facilitate the autonomy of older people can only very partially be fulfilled if they are based on what he considers the one-sided perspective of rational control over the problems of the aged, since an essential aspect of such autonomy, the maintenance of an identity over time, is intimately related to subjectively experienced lifetimes. 'We cannot do without chronological time concepts, nor can we do without objectifying scientific research and organizations, but we need a more moderate and more respectful relation to subjective experiences of ageing.' His article offers tools to develop greater sensitivity and insight to analyze such experiences.

Carroll L. Estes shares a concern for a more complex study of both subjective and objective experiences of ageing. In 'From Gender to the Political Economy of Ageing', she outlines a multi-level analytical framework in order better to understand the way in which the experiences of gender and old age are socially constructed and are 'shaped by the lifelong gender,

social class, and racial and ethnic group status' of individuals. As Anne Jamieson suggests in her review article, 'Social Gerontology: Concepts and Concerns in the US and Europe', which discusses a recent book co-edited by Estes, such an approach has a particular resonance in debates about ageing in the United States and also connects with the approach of much European research. Estes's article draws on a wide body of literature and puts the situation of older women at the centre of concerns – justified by demographics alone. She engages with contemporary American discussions about the future of Social Security and addresses the economic disadvantage and discrimination faced by racial and ethnic minorities as well as the reproduction of class relations through dependency on public and private agencies. The way in which social policy in the U.S. structures 'white male advantage and . . . female disadvantage, particularly that of women of colour . . . through gendered institutions,' she writes, means that critical perspectives on gender, social policy and ageing require both life course and political economy perspectives.

This is, of course, just as true of work which focuses on European realities and indeed, as Anne Jamieson suggests, different labels often mask considerable common concerns in work on ageing in the United States and in Europe. One thing that is shared is an increasing recognition of the heterogeneity of the older population. Another is an emphasis on the communities where people live which helps to locate older people within a social context. The significance of social context and the need for a better analytical framework, especially given the increasing fragmentation and specialization in the provision of care in many countries, are at the core of Piet P. J. Houben's article, 'Towards a Conceptual Framework for "Ageing in Place" of Frail Older Adults.'

According to Houben, social quality requires enhancing the possibility that older people are 'given the opportunity to stay in their own familiar home and community as long as possible and continue the relationship patterns they have established . . .' This is summarised by the originally Dutch term 'ageing in place' and involves not only housing but also care and other social services. Houben points out that whereas until the 1970s there was a divergence between, on the one hand, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries, where special sheltered housing residential care facilities were considered a mark of advanced provision, in contrast with England, Germany, France – and particularly with Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece – where this was not the case, there has now been a certain convergence within the European Union. Although there continue to be different approaches and although change has also been driven by financial factors, the 1990s saw the extension of home care and a positive value given to the possibility of growing old in familiar surroundings in most

European countries. Discussing the need for flexibility according to the needs and desires of a target group, rather than according to professional prescriptions, he says that amongst the potential achievements of individualisation are an increased assertiveness and capacity for self-direction, both of which are pre-conditions for greater autonomy. Yet he is also careful to specify how competencies in the last stages of life may vary according to different patterns earlier in the life course.

John Mephram's article, 'What is it Like to Grow Old? Ageing in Some Recent Women's Fiction' links both with 'ageing in place' and with different concepts of time and ways of expressing personal experiences. 'Fiction,' John Mephram writes, 'which specialises in presenting how things look from the inside can help us to imagine the many subjective experiences of ageing. Fictions are like thought experiments. They represent the particularised individual person in his or her oddity and complexity.' Mephram considers 'the mental work of ageing' in which older people 'adapt, re-deploy, resist and recombine available cultural models'. He suggests that fiction can be an important resource in developing an understanding of the need that people have to make meanings and narratives and hence to contribute to their quality of life. Fictional characters are imagined, but narrative fiction or drama, he argues, can make accessible, through the prism of the imagination of the author, an inner life otherwise inaccessible. He explores the different ways in which the needs of older women in three novels for autonomy and a private space and for reminiscence are portrayed. Through displaying the complexity of some experiences of ageing, fiction can help to protect against cultural stereotypes, but he warns that it can also simply recycle conventional images, such as the redemptive moment of death.

Diversity across the lifecycle presents a challenge not only to social scientists but to those who can influence the types of environments in which people live and facilitate, or not, the capacities of people of different abilities. Malcolm Johnson explores 'The Designer's Role in the Ageing Process'. He explains how designers typically work according to the functional needs of the majority of users, which are modeled, however, according to norms that are far from representative of social diversity. He discusses the complexity of developing visual languages which correspond to the preferences of a user group with which the designer is unfamiliar and which override negative user associations. He points out that designers, and the market for products, are influenced by wider negative social attitudes about the elderly and the disabled. Additional inhibiting factors derive from shortcomings in their training, which puts a premium on visual accomplishment rather than unseen functional attributes. Recently the concept of 'Design for All' or 'Inclusive Design' has been widely discussed in design

journals, but investment in products and environments has been held back by a lack of user demand. 'Within the design community,' he writes, 'it is now increasingly recognised that three critical issues must be addressed: poor intuitive understanding by designers of older people; lack of data about the ageing process, its conditions and resulting limitations; and lack of case studies and models to assist in producing designs for third age users.' But wider issues must also be tackled. Political will, he argues, is important to change attitudes in the general population. The British Government is now investing money to try to ensure that research will be of benefit to the widest possible populations while disability legislation is beginning to have some effect in increasing access to goods, facilities and services. Johnson suggests that when the potential benefits of enabling people to stay in their homes and communities are better understood by the wider population, he argues, fear of impairment should diminish and acceptance of the needs of disabled and older people increase. He urges educationalists in design and architecture to take action now to prepare the design community to meet these needs.

Diversity across the population and over the lifecycle has been crystallised in other types of debates in a variety of countries when claims are made about intergenerational conflict. These claims have particular political resonance in discussions about the future of Social Security in the United States, but are by no means absent from European discussions. Across Europe, debate about intergenerational relations is conducted in terms of the issue of long term care, reassessment of ideas about retirement in the light of the increasing heterogeneity of the retirement experience, and recognition of the change and unpredictability of family formations and work and employment that are increasingly features of the life course. Anne Jamieson discusses these and other issues in a review article of two recently published edited collections, one American, mentioned above, and one European, on the myth of intergenerational conflict, and compares and contrasts the different traditions of gerontology. Not only is there evidence of strong bonds between generations and that families care about as well as for their older relatives and that transfers take place from the older to the younger generations throughout the life course, but that public provision encourages rather than discourages informal caregiving.

All of these articles present new and deeper ways of considering issues that are integral to developing a concept of social quality. They are reflective about the tools of analysis that are available and the complexity of social issues that are on political agendas in a wide variety of countries in different parts of the world. It is hoped that they may contribute to making political and policy debates more reflective of the diverse needs of populations

across the life cycle so that social justice, inclusion, and participation become more than mere slogans.

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