Demographic change challenges modern societies such as Japan and Germany. What are these challenges and what will the future look like? Other contributions to this volume focus on the challenges and opportunities which arise from ageing societies with declining populations, discussing the social inequality brought on by demographic ageing, regional (socio-spatial) disparities, as well as the opportunities and challenges within the silver market, the situation of older employees, and so on. The vision for the future of ageing societies seems to be ‘grey’, so to speak; however, in some societal sub-areas a ‘silver’ line can be seen. In order to translate these visions into new (better) societal perspectives, the initial efforts in shaping societies must be continued, especially efforts that aim at changing the construction of people’s life courses, the division of labour and social inequalities, but above all efforts that prevent the widening of social inequality between age groups and gender.

This chapter investigates what societies – especially by way of a comparison between Germany and Japan – can learn from each other and what can be done to provide for the present and the future. These questions will be approached in three steps: First, an overview of the analytic points relevant to ageing societies and ageing as a so-called ‘societal problem’ will be given (Backes 1997). Second, against this background, the chapter will focus on the challenges of dealing with ageing societies in social discourses and used measures. Third, the chapter stresses perspectives concerning the future; that is, the demands to draw out a model of a society of socially balanced longevity based on a political philosophy of living and ageing.
2. Status Quo

2.1 Ageing Societies – Analytical Focus

The analytical focus stems from critical gerontology and the political economy of ageing. From this theoretical perspective, society as a whole has to deal with the challenges of ageing in the context of demographic change and of broad societal change. Demographic ageing and the structural development of age and ageing, although important, are only a part of societal change as a whole. Demographic change (i.e., declining birth rates, increasing life expectancy, shrinking populations) and the ageing process of society (i.e., the ‘societal ageing’ of institutions and individuals) are defined as both a result and an interwoven part of societal change. Additional and amalgamated parts in the larger context of present (and future) societal change are, for instance, gender-related issues, the individualization of life courses, as well as the on-going processes of migration, social diversification and globalization. These changes have significantly affected all sub-areas of society (at the social, individual and institutional level); that is, on the cultural, political and economic systems (for Japan see Hewitt 2002); on education, the labour market, markets for goods and services, social services, family and neighbourhoods; and on people’s individual life decisions (socially located in specific cohorts and generations, as well as particular social situations, and influenced by gender, ethnicity and other social factors). At the level of society and identity, important elements of structure and change are gender, social class, and ethnicity – all amalgated with age.

2.2 Concept: Ageing as a ‘Societal Problem’

Changes within ageing societies produce new and modified problems or challenges on a quantitative and qualitative level. When developing different aspects of the theoretical notion of ageing as a ‘societal problem’ (Backes 1997), it is important to fully realize its implications within society and to acknowledge its societal causes, conditions and consequences, which must all necessarily be approached with societal tools, tools in the form of discourses and concrete measures. Age(ing) today – as a ‘problem’ and/or as a ‘developmental task’ – affects not only a few individuals (‘individual problem’), but large groups and institutions as well (‘social problem’), and society as a whole (‘societal problem’). Socio-political processes diagnose so-called ‘social (and