

THE APPEARANCE OF THE MODERN CAPITALIST MARKET AND ITS EFFECTS ON WOMEN'S AGENCY. THE LOSS OF AURA IN WALTER BENJAMIN

LA APARICIÓN DEL MERCADO CAPITALISTA Y SUS EFECTOS SOBRE LA AGENCIA DE LA MUJER. LA PÉRDIDA DE AURA EN WALTER BENJAMIN

Alicia VALDÉS
*Universitat de Barcelona**

ABSTRACT: Historical processes imply different impacts on different historical agents. The processes that shaped the neoliberal capitalist market imposed the white heterosexual male as the only official agent of historical processes. This imposition was the basis for the construction of the current patriarchal system. This article asks how these historical processes affected women. How female agency has been conditioned by capitalism. This essay seeks to observe how the processes of consumption and mass production have affected the construction of female agency during the period of early capitalism. The conclusion is that this period needed to condition the construction of female agency by transforming it into patterns of consumption and production that meet the needs of the capitalist system itself.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Female agency, Consumerism, Capitalism, Walter Benjamin, aura.

* Profesora Asociada, Departament MIDE Departament de Mètodes d'Investigació i Diagnòstic en Educació, Facultat d'Educació, Universitat de Barcelona, Passeig de la Vall d'Hebron, 171 08035 Barcelona. This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (MINECO) under grants FFI2015-70273-P and FEDER, UE. Mail: alicia.valdes@ub.edu.

RESUMEN: Los procesos históricos suponen diferentes impactos a los diferentes agentes históricos. Los procesos que dieron forma al mercado capitalista neoliberal impusieron al varón blanco heterosexual como único agente oficial de los procesos históricos. Esta imposición supuso la base para la construcción del actual sistema patriarcal. Este artículo se pregunta cómo estos procesos históricos afectaron a la mujer. Cómo la agencia femenina ha sido condicionada por el capitalismo. Este ensayo busca observar cómo los procesos de consumo y producción de masas han afectado a la construcción de la agencia femenina durante el periodo del capitalismo temprano. La conclusión este periodo necesitó condicionar la construcción de la agencia femenina mediante su transformación en patrones de consumo y producción que satisfagan las necesidades del propio sistema capitalista.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Feminismo, Agencia femenina, consumo, capitalismo, Walter Benjamin, aura.

1. Introduction

Who is an official agent in historical processes? Who are considered to be mere witnesses in official histories? Are the historical processes traditionally seen as triumphs, such as the Enlightenment, considered triumphs for everyone, or are they only triumphs for those who have written history for centuries? In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin answers the question of neutrality concerning historicism “[...] if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor” (Benjamin, 2007, p. 256).

Official histories have always been told by the victors in the historical processes. *Le livre noir du colonialisme: XVIe-XXIe siècle: de l’extermination à la repentance* (Ferro et al., 2003) shows how history can be read in different ways. This book contains numerous essays that tell the processes of colonialism from the point of view of those who are never seen as the primary agents of historical processes but rather as mere witnesses of such processes. As Benjamin points out:

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another (2007, p. 256).

Therefore, we can deduce that a story that erodes the history of the non-victorious is just as barbaric as the processes they went through.

Although the history of colonialism is a clear example of how historical stories vary from subject to subject, ethnicity is not the only variable for how history should be told. As Rita Felski affirms in her book *The Gender of Modernity*, gender is also a historical dimension that must be taken into account when reading historical processes: "Gender affects not only just the factual content of historical knowledge but also the philosophical assumptions underlying our interpretations of the nature and meaning of social processes" (1995, p. 1). Moreover, Felski mentions two different dimensions that we must focus on. On the one hand, one must analyze how historical processes affect different subjects in different ways. On the other hand, one must consider that historical stories will also differ from discourse to discourse. That is to say, not only are phenomena different for different subjects but how such historical processes are told will differ from each point of view.

Additionally, and more importantly, the inclusion of gender as a historical dimension must be considered when studying history. Not only does Felski include gender as a historical dimension, Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner also introduced this dimension in their paper *Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives* (1989). The authors affirm that "[f]ocusing on social class differences in family strategies, procreation, sexuality, consumerism, professionalization, and state policy, we argue that the organization of gender relations and social reproduction crucially shaped macrohistorical processes, as well as being shaped by them" (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, p. 381).

Although Benjamin criticizes the linearity of historicism and its way of writing and reading history through the eyes of the victors, the truth is that when describing a historical moment and its processes such as modernity in *fin de siècle* Paris, Benjamin did not include a critical reading on the gendered dimension of history. That is to say, the decentering of the central character of history does not engage in a gendered reading of historical agency. Thus, this paper aims to clarify how modernity –the development of the modern capitalist market– affected men and women differently in the context in which Benjamin wrote his masterpiece *The Arcades Project* (1999), nineteenth-century Paris. This gendered revision will take place through a feminist analysis of the figure of the sex worker as depicted in Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*. This paper defends the thesis that, for Benjamin, the main consequence over women of the emergence of mass consumption

patterns implies the loss of the aura of women. To him, this loss is best illustrated in the figure of the prostitute, which shows what he defines as the victory of the inorganic over the organic.

This paper first focuses on how the appearance of mass production and consumption influenced the construction of female agency. Then, it analyzes changes in architecture, urban planning and economics and how they affected Parisian women and their identity; I will focus on the traditional binomial relationship between women and nature, how female reproductive capacity has affected how women had been seen in society and the appearance of women on the public scene.

Secondly, I will analyze Benjamin's interpretation of the results of such processes on women through his reading of the figure of the prostitute. Lastly, I will show how several male authors have read the construction of female agency from an androcentric point of view; and how this reading has helped to build a romantic and non-emancipatory conception of women.

2. Women and Production

Capitalism changed the Western world. This transformation had its roots in the changes occurring in production and consumption. These economic transformations have impacted urban planning, culture, and how humans would, from that moment, build their identities and selves around consumption and commodities. However, I argue that these changes involved a more profound transformation for the female agency than for the male one.

We cannot accurately analyze the relationship between women and production without necessarily setting our attention on the sexual division of labour. The sexual division of labour relates to the traditional idea that there is a natural biological determinism that affirms that some jobs –related to the productive sphere– are best performed by men, while other activities –usually related to the reproductive sphere– are best performed by women. This idea traces back as far as the Aristotelian division between matter (feminine) and form (masculine), a division widely contested by feminists who affirm that “[...] the important Aristotelian distinctions between ‘form’ and ‘matter’, ‘mover’ and ‘moved’ ‘actuality’ and ‘potentiality’, are all used by Aristotle to distinguish male and female” (Lange, 1983, p. 2). The dichotomic pair of matter and form contributed to

the sexual division of labour. However, another crucial dichotomic pair played a central role in this division to classify between productive labour and reproductive activity; I am referring to the dichotomic pair of man and nature. The connection between nature and matter is previous to Aristotle's theorization on matter and form. The sexual division of labour relies on the idea that each gender has specific natural biological characteristics that prepare the subject for these activities. Therefore, due to their reproductive capacity to give birth and their nurture nature, women are the best subjects to raise children and be housewives.

Maria Miles claims in her book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* that “[t]he concept of labour is usually reserved for men’s productive work under capitalist conditions, which means work for the production of surplus-value” (Miles, 1998, p. 45). This definition of work in capitalism is essential to understand the role that women will be forced to play in early capitalist societies. If work performed by women in capitalist societies is not considered to produce surplus-value, it will not be defined as labour. Therefore, the female agency will not be constructed in terms of a productive member of society, not even in the cases where working-class women will serve as maids since such work does not produce surplus and only responds to women’s natural role in society. This rejection of the reproductive realm as belonging to the economic system is one of the central critiques of feminist economic theory (Ferber & Nelson, 1993; Pérez Orozco, 2017; Valdés, 2019). Furthermore, the sexual division of labour in the capitalist mode of production was the key element to separate the private and the public spheres and, therefore, divide the spaces in which women and men would respectively construct their identities under capitalism. While men’s work would be seen as labour due to its utility for capitalism, women’s traditional roles during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were not seen as professions but rather as natural activities related to women.

Brenner and Laslett (1989) affirm that the gendered separation of the private and the public sphere was highly institutionalized during the nineteenth century. Such institutionalization occurred because the separation between private and public sphere “[...] has been central to the organization of gender in modern industrial society” (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, p. 386). When analyzing changes between the late eighteenth and the early twentieth century, the question of women’s power inside and outside the home was a central question when analyzing changes within social reproduction and family. Furthermore,

space and public presence are crucial elements when analyzing women's role in society. As Jean Bethke Elshtain points out, "[...]where a theorist draws lines and makes divisions, how he categorizes the structure of reality, which notions he finds basic and which less essential, are critical to an examination of his ideas on the public and private and their implications for women and politics" (2020, p. 100).

The reproductive dimension was not the only root of the women-nature binomial relationship. The separation of the public and private sphere reinforced this binomial relationship by assuming that women were naturally more prepared for childcare:

The ideal of the moral mother and the claim that it was no longer men but women who were endowed with ethical superiority, were embodied in beliefs that celebrated women's piety, purity, and domesticity. Men, in contrast, were seen as aggressive, competitive, sexual (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, p. 387).

Women were not only more connected to nature, but they were also domestic. Several women's groups used this definition of female attributes when arguing for greater public participation of women. As María Valverde shows in her paper *When the Mother of the Race is Free* (1992), white middle-class women's groups advocated for women's power in society, relying on a natural moral superiority that came from motherhood and the importance of reproduction for social –and always racial and racist– purposes.

It is important to notice two crucial elements when talking about the feminine dimension of the private sphere. First, although the private sphere was associated with femininity, it did not imply that women were the central character within the household. In fact, male pleasures and needs were the central elements of the home, while women worked inside the home to fulfil men's pleasures and necessities. One could thus affirm that the ideal behind the separation was that women's work belonged inside the home, and this work was subordinated to the desires of the male breadwinner. Second, one must bear in mind that middle-class women and working-class women faced neither the same situations nor attained the same results due to the separation between the public and the private sphere. Since working-class men difficultly had salaries to sustain an entire family, working-class women usually had to take jobs outside the home. This happened first in other homes as maids, and in the late

nineteenth century, white-collar jobs for women in retail stores would appear. Furthermore, the rejection of females' economic activity as productive work also implies the historical omission of the work of slaves and migrants that worked in different countries as the collection of essays edited by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild in the book *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, And Sex Workers In The New Economy* show (Ehrenreich, Hochschild, & Kay, 2003).

This analysis of the role of women as caretakers and men as breadwinners results in what Maria Mies identifies as the *classic capitalist couple* (2001). Maria Mies defines the classic capitalist couple as "the 'free' wage earner or 'free' owner of means of production and his dependent housewife" (2001, p. 119). This capitalist couple is a central element for the capitalist system's development as it grants the reproduction of the workforce at zero cost through the female obligation to take care of the house and support the growth and care of productive agents.

In summary, women faced several difficult obstacles to construct female agency related to their productive activity in early capitalism. First, the nature-women binominal relationship that traditionally binds women with nature due to the reproductive activity was reinforced by separating the public and the private sphere. The binomial relationship and the separation between spheres influenced the appearance of a sexual division of labour that would classify jobs by gender and create a hierarchy, where men's jobs were to be considered as labour. In contrast, women's jobs were considered to be the natural activity of women in society. Consequently, much of this work would a) not be paid and b) would not provide women with the status of producer or breadwinner.

Consequently, we could affirm that middle-class women were overall excluded from the productive system due to their obligation to remain confined at home. On the other hand, working-class women were not excluded as they had to first work as maids and then as white-collar workers, but they were misrepresented and were not defined as workers or breadwinners, unlike their male counterparts.

3. The transformation of urban planning

Before analyzing the impact of early capitalist consumption patterns on women, I first need to analyze how consumption transformed the city and how the citizens would move around the city. As Frank Trentmant affirms, “[i]f there is one agreement between theorists of modernity and those of post-modernity, it is about the centrality of consumption to modern capitalism and contemporary culture” (2004, p. 373). Urban planning is a clear expression of this centrality.

Consumption, production and urban planning have always been deeply interrelated. Ever-growing production needed better and broader paved surfaces for goods to be transported, retailers needed to make their products visible to pedestrians, they needed their shops to work as small-scale world exhibitions that would promote consumption. Overall, capitalism required the city to undergo a massive reorganization to reinforce consumption and facilitate the transport of new goods. These new needs were widely covered by Paris’ public urban planning policies and the new architecture that would from then on characterize Paris. As a matter of fact, the recent Covid-19 crisis has illustrated how urban planning focused on the transportation of goods leaves little room for a human inhabitancy of the city. An example of this centrality of commodities in urban planning is narrow sidewalks in Madrid, where the minimum distance between people could not be guaranteed.

The arcades, which Benjamin studied and analyzed in depth in his *Arcades Project* (1999), started appearing during the 1830s. However, it was not until the 1850s that Paris would undergo a complete transformation at the hands of Haussmann.

Arcades are large glass-roofed corridors where several shops were placed, which Benjamin constantly defines as the early spaces of consumerism. For Benjamin, there are two critical conditions for the appearance of the arcades. The first condition is the rise of the textile trade. Large stores, which would from then on keep larger product stocks, started appearing. The second condition is related to architecture: the emergence of iron construction. Therefore, the appearance of the arcades is the result of an expansion of textile trade and innovation in the industry. Larger quantities of goods were being produced: it was the beginning of a new model of production that would later give birth to mass consumption.

These new patterns of production and consumption were entangled with a new type of society, a society based on spectacle. The logic of this new market and this new society is visible in World Exhibitions. World Exhibitions focused on and increased the exchange-value of commodities, leaving aside the use-value of such products "World Exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity Fetish" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 17). Commodities, which were not valuable due to their use but rather due to their exchange value, could be seen by an audience of consumers in a new type of spectacle that reinforced the idea of consumption. The logic of such a spectacle could also be observed on a small scale in the arcades by the appearance of storefronts that would constantly display large quantities of new products targeted, in most cases, to women. More significant production requires more extensive facilities and better material conditions for transportation. Here is where urban planning policies enter the scene in early capitalism in Paris.

When I refer to urban planning policies that were deeply related to capitalism and that affected Paris' urban structure, I am referring to the process of Haussmannization. Vanessa R. Schwartz also notes the visible relationship between Haussmann's policies and socio-economic changes, when she affirms in her book *Spectacular Realities* that, " 'Haussmannization', which vastly altered the city's topography, is often used as a shorthand for the profound economic and cultural changes associated with the ascension of the bourgeois social order in the Paris of the 1850s and 1860s" (1998, p. 16).

Haussmann's urban planning involved two central elements. The first element was the demolition of the old medieval neighbourhoods that shaped the city's centre. Old buildings were replaced by new ones, which in turn led to increased rents. These increased prices forced low-income families to abandon the city centre and move to the suburbs. One can understand this populational movement as an early type of gentrification. High-income families will from then on inhabit the city centre, the same people that would consume in the new zones enabled for consumption.

The other main characteristic of Haussmannization involved the transformation of the streets. The centre of Paris was traditionally characterized by extremely narrow, labyrinthine streets that had served as the perfect place to erect barricades during the revolts. Haussmann decided to widen these streets to facilitate transport, but he was also trying to prevent barricades from being erected. Wide avenues and better visibility made it easier to surveillance a city well known for

its revolutionary movements. One of the characteristics of this new Paris can be extracted from the quote by Simmel in Vanessa F. Schwartz's book:

George Simmel, the early urban sociologist, noted that “the interpersonal relationships of people in big cities are characterized by a markedly greater emphasis on the use of the eyes than of the ears” as if to say that what marked urban life was its flamboyant visuality (1998, p. 16).

Visual elements, such as advertisements and storefronts, transformed how people moved around the city. While men had always been allowed to move freely around the city regardless of their socio-economic statuses (the tramp, the ragpicker and the *flâneur* illustrate this), the appearance of visual elements related to spaces for consumption was a significant change for women. While women had been seen as traditionally belonging to the private sphere, the appearance of open spaces, such as the corridors, or avenues filled with stores, created a new arena in which women would become a public and visible agent. Nevertheless, what kind of agency were women allowed to construct? I argue that this agency relates to consumption.

4. Women as consumers

From the previous analysis on the role of women as non-producers, one can analyze that the feminine agency was subordinated to men through what has been analyzed by several authors as the sexual contract and the marriage contract (Pateman, 1988), and the process of housewifization and the creation of the classic capitalist couple (Mies, 2001). However, the role of women within the public space dramatically changes once the revolution in production acts upon patterns of consumption.

The analysis of the urban changes related to early capitalism illustrates how the city's new structure serves as the perfect ally to establish a new behaviour focused on consumption and converts commodities into the central element of the city. This alliance between the city and commodities, the emergence of storefronts –with glass windows that not only displayed the store's interior but also reflected the viewer's image– played a crucial role in the activity of women through the new urban structure. Nevertheless, how does the new structure of the city affect women? As previously stated in this paper, women's activity will be confined to the household. Middle-class women were directly harassed when

leaving the house, while the labour performed by working-class women outside the interior of the familial house was being devalued. Women were supposed to remain in the family space, which conditioned the kinds of activities they could also engage in publicly. Thus, the idea of the *flâneur* was only attainable by men, who were the subjects that could freely stroll around the city. As Janet Wolff affirms in her essay “Gender and the haunting of cities (or, the retirement of the *flâneur*)”,

[t]he *flâneur*, however, is necessarily male. The privilege of passing unnoticed in the city, particularly in the period in which the *flâneur* flourished –that is, the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century– was not accorded to women, whose presence in the streets would certainly be noticed. Not only – as many historians of the period have pointed outn, women in public, and particularly women apparently wandering without aim, immediately attract the negative stamp of the “non-respectable”. It is not accident that the prostitute appears as the central female trope in the discourse of modernity (2006, p. 19).

Although the sex worker will be analyzed in upcoming sections, I find it crucial to analyze the way in which the emergence of spaces for capitalist consumption transformed women's urban mobility. The department store was one space that would play a key role in developing the feminine identity during early capitalism, blurring the sexual division of space. On the one hand, middle-class women became critical consumers of such stores. Women mainly consumed, apart from goods to cover basic needs, household goods and retail goods. Although their duties were confined to the household, the truth was that many products and goods were entering the house. The appearance of new necessities within the home and the family displaced women's activities to retail stores to buy the necessary goods. The number of middle-class housewives and mothers who appeared in department stores and shopping centres in the capital led to the necessity to have female workers within department stores, such as new white-collar jobs as shop assistants or as waitresses in female-only restaurants and restrooms. Women entered into the public scene, but this scene was built for men by men. The need to have female workers where middle-class women were becoming visible was a key element.

Middle-class women could freely move around early shopping centres without the fear of being defined as prostitutes or as women with a low

socio-economic class. However, working-class women were not only becoming visible as workers in department stores. As Laslett and Brenner note,

although, in the first instance, department store appeals were made more to middle-class women with discretionary income than to working-class women, the principle of free entrance without an obligation to buy and the development of special sections for women with less money (the bargain basement) expanded the culture of consumerism to the working-class as well. Department stores became like museums of the modern, fashionable life, open without charge to all women (Leach 1984) (1989, pp. 394–395).

Whether one talks about window-shopping, the austere consumption of working-class families or the excessive consumption by middle-class and high-class families, the truth is that family consumption rested in the hands of mothers and wives. Consequently, as women became the primary consumers of this early capitalist society, they also became the targets for advertisements.

This new and early advertisement industry portrayed a new kind of feminine and a new way of behaving like a woman. The idea of the perfect housewife changed. Women would not only be seen now as caretakers, housewives and mothers; from then on, women would also be seen as individual agents with material desires and needs that could be covered by consumerism, “the ‘new woman’ was an ideal attainable by a very small minority at the turn of the century” (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, p. 395). Women were faced with an ideal model characterized by the products they consumed, which was not attainable by most women, but an ideal that seemed more within reach due to bargain sales in different department stores.

Creating a feminine agency based on consumption can be deduced from the necessity of early capitalism to create new publics and new niches for consumption. The birth of the capitalist system needed new consumers to whom it could sell the goods that came from a new production process.

Consequently, from the analysis of women’s role in capitalist production and consumption, one can affirm that a) the ideal of the housewife before capitalist consumerism relied on the idea of the nurturing, caring mother that stays in the household, this ideal, non-accessible for every woman due to socio-economic inequalities was based on the intertwining of the sexual division of labour and the sexual division of labour. However, this ideal changes once capitalist

consumerism enters the scene; b) capitalist consumerism changes the idea of woman in several ways. It creates the ideal of a housewife whose emergence in the public sphere is profoundly influenced by the creation of public spaces dedicated to the spectacle of consumerism. This emergence of mass consumption works in different manners for women with different socio-economic statuses. On the one hand, some of them will enter the scene as mere consumers – high class women, on the other hand, some of them will enter the scene as consumer of bargain goods, but also as white collar workers that will from now on serve in stores whose targeted public were housewives.

Consequently, one can affirm that the connection between female agency and consumerism results from a necessity inherent to early capitalism, which later switches to a female agency based on production as promoted by the wartime *we can do it* propaganda poster in a context characterized by lack of productive agents. This same agency will once again change to a female agency based on consumption through postfeminism in a phase of capitalism characterized by the need for new consumers and new consumption patterns based on identities. By analyzing the relationship between consumption, production and female agency, we can deduce that changes affecting female agency within a capitalist society respond to the needs of a patriarchal capitalist system.

However, Benjamin's analysis of the effects of mass consumption and production on women does not focus on their agency to freely move around the city; it analyzes how the mechanical reproduction that characterizes capitalist production and art affects women producing the loss of their aura.

5. The figure of the sex worker in Walter Benjamin's writings

When analyzing the changes that capitalist production and consumption have on women and their loss of aura, Benjamin fixes his attention on the dual dimension of producer-consumer that we find in the sex worker. For Benjamin, central to this figure as a symbol of modernity is that they are the commodity that best represents the triumph of modernity over all other things. The image that Benjamin creates from the figure of the sex worker is of a good produced on a mass scale: the sex worker is a commodity – the ultimate commodity. Moreover, what differentiates the modern sex worker from the sex worker of earlier ages is precisely her dimension of a commodity, a dimension acquired by her characteristic of a mass-produced good.

The prostitute does not sell her labour power; her job, however, entails the fiction that she sells her powers of pleasure. Insofar as this represents the utmost extension attainable by the sphere of the commodity, the prostitute may be considered, from early on, a precursor of commodity capitalism. But precisely because the commodity character was in other respects undeveloped, this aspect did not need to stand out so glaringly as would subsequently be the case. As a matter of fact, prostitution in the Middle Ages does not, for example, display the crudeness that in the nineteenth century would become the rule (Benjamin, 1999, p. 348).

The figure of the sex worker is the allegory of the victory of the inorganic over the organic, the triumph of commodities over nature. As one can observe, Benjamin speaks of the organic in a similar manner in which the term nature worked in the binomial women/nature. Moreover, Benjamin analyzes women's separation from nature as a product of the influence of modernity over women. My thesis is that Benjamin describes the effects of the modern market on women as the loss of their *aura*.

In the context of early capitalism, prostitutes not only performed and made the artificial relation between nature and women visible, but they also made the victory of commodities over nature visible. As Walter Benjamin states, "[t]he commodity, which is the last burning-glass of historical semblance <*Schein*>, celebrates its triumph in the fact that nature itself takes on a commodity character. It is this commodity appearance <*Trenschein*> of nature that is embodied in the whore" (1999, p. 345). However, this will not be commodities' only victory. The fetish dimension of commodities will also triumph, the victory of the inorganic over the organic, "[u]nder the dominion of the commodity fetish, the sex appeal of the woman is more or less tinged with the appeal of the commodity" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 345). However, the complete fetishization of the sex worker will also spread throughout the rest of the female population since the professionalization of prostitution, along with the use of cosmetics to recreate an image provided by advertising, converted women into a reproducible image, "[t]he modern advertisement shows, from another angle, to what extent the attractions of the woman and those of the commodity can be merged" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 345).

For Benjamin, fetishism and sex blurred the limits between the organic and the inorganic. Finally, the inorganic, represented by the fetish, defeated the organic through the establishment of fashion. Fashion deeply affected the

construction of female agency during early capitalism. Women became public agents through consumption, but that consumption responds to patterns with which women must conform. The appearance of what we would call *it girls* in magazines and mass media advertisements will strongly condition how women will appear in public places.

In the form taken by prostitution in the big cities, the woman appears not only as commodity but, in a precise sense, as mass-produced article. This is indicated by the masking of individual expression in favour of a professional appearance, such as makeup provides. The point is made still more empathically, later on, by the uniformed girls of the music-hall review (Benjamin, 1999, p. 346).

As crucial agents targeted by new patterns of consumption, women represent the ultimate loss of aura in the Benjaminian sense, “[m]ass production is the principal economic cause –and class warfare the principal social cause– of the decline of the aura” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 343).

6. Conclusions

To define modernity as the era articulated around the public sphere only relates to the experience of those agents who were allowed to become public during this era, in other words, men. Furthermore, this affirmation also erases the experience of migrant and working-class women who already occupied specific spaces of the city as sex workers, maids and nurses illustrate (D’Souza & McDonough, 2006; Ehrenreich *et al.*, 2003; Elshtain, 2020). Thus, to analyze the limits of the construction of identities during modernity, it is necessary to observe who was allowed to become a public agent in this time. Furthermore, to see the gendered dimension of the public space in modern Paris, one can compare different identities. On the one hand, the tramp, the ragpicker and the *flâneur* (male subjects) enjoyed the strolling of the city. However, on the other hand, female counterpart identities that strolled the city, the public space, were devalued and marked as non-respectable. An example of this non-respectability is visible in how the sex worker is portrayed in Benjamin’s writings.

The *flâneur* could be described as a modern wanderer in the streets of a new era, a discoverer of the new lifestyle reflected in the city. However, his role is

always that of a witness; *flâneurs* embody a certain moral superiority, they do not fall prey to the temptations of this new capitalist mode of living,

an intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next street corner, of a distant mass of foliage, of a street name (Benjamin, 1999, p. 417).

This avoidance of the capitalist system illustrates that the idea of the *flâneur* is characterized by its gendered dimension and his class and, therefore, his race. This intersectional analysis of the *flâneur* is profoundly analyzed in the book *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender Public Space And Visual Culture In Nineteenth-Century Paris* (D'Souza & McDonough, 2006). The *flâneur*, in contrast to the other characters of the city, is capable of seeing through the new elements of the capitalist city to the true structure of the streets.

What is the difference between the ragpicker, the tramp and the *flâneur*? One could say that there is a qualitative difference between the activities carried out by the three characters. However, all three wander through the city collecting elements, from images and sounds to rags and papers. The principal difference between the three is the hierarchical position that they possess within the city. The city is the stage of modernity, which also reflects the social hierarchy imposed by capitalism. The city's hierarchy is crystallized by the spaces where characters may or may not be visible. The figure of the *flâneur* is the expression of an educated middle-class man who decides to lead his life wandering around the streets, while the ragpicker and the tramp have not decided this fate themselves. The *flâneur* can make the streets an internal space because the city was designed for him, while women or low-class agents could never see the city as a part of them or something familiar. The city was not designed for their presence.

Therefore, the *flâneur* is the male representation of the new urban middle class. However, that middle class is represented as a male collective agent because the separation of the male public sphere and the female private sphere will remain one of the main characteristics of modernity. As Rita Felski affirms, "[m]any of the key symbols of the modern in the nineteenth century – the public sphere, the man of the crowd, the stranger, the dandy, the flaneur – were indeed gendered. There could, for example, be no direct female equivalent

of the flâneur, given that any woman who loitered in the streets of the nineteenth-century metropolis was taken for a prostitute” (Felski, 1995, p. 16).

Although capitalism deeply conditioned women's appearance as public agents in modern society, women's entry into the public sphere was made difficult by separating the public and private sphere –a vital element for industrial capitalism– which confined women's labour to the interior of the home. Later on, women were allowed to become public agents but only as consumers. This new dimension of female public agency sped up the appearance of public spaces only for women and the appearance of white-collar jobs for women.

To summarize, we could conclude that the historical processes of modernity did not include women as active agents of change. The French Revolution defined humanity as *mankind*, and freedom was articulated around a collective, public male agency. The nation, which was born after the French Revolution, was articulated based on white male citizenship in Europe (Pateman, 1988). As a consequence of excluding women and non-white European males from historical processes, none of these actors has been seen as full citizens since the beginning. This lack of belonging from the outset is why white males saw none of them as belonging to civilization during the nineteenth century. White women, meanwhile, represented the kind and charming face of nature.

Romantics saw women as redeemers who would save *mankind* from the barbarities of modernity: “[i]n texts of early Romanticism, one finds some of the most explicitly nostalgic representations of femininity as a redemptive refuge from the constraints of civilization. Seen to be less specialized and differentiated than men, located within the household and an intimate web of familial relations, more closely linked to nature through their reproductive capacity, woman embodied a sphere of atemporal authenticity seemingly untouched by the alienation and fragmentation of modern life” (Felski, 1995, p. 16). This ideal woman is altered by the figures of the lesbian and the sex worker. While lesbians broke the androcentric schematic by not desiring men, sex workers demolished the traditional relationship between women and reproduction. However, more importantly, the figure of the woman will, from then on, be altered for authors as Benjamin due to the loss of their *aura*, what he defines as uniqueness (Benjamin, 1935).

Capitalism, modernity and the appearance of mass production and mass consumption profoundly altered how people constructed their identities as

public agents. However, it is essential to note that male and female agencies underwent different processes during these historical events. Women were allowed to construct their identities around consumption without being judged for it. However, when they constructed their identities around production or merely outside capitalism (by not producing surplus value but rather producing other values), their jobs and activities were devalued, and they were misrepresented.

The idea of women losing their aura in modernity can be summarized as the thoughts of androcentric authors who saw women as existing outside historical processes and pictured women as victims of modernity.

This paper did not aim to be an ode to consumption. It concludes that within capitalism, and as long as capitalism needs new consumers to be constantly created, the creation of identities, in particular female identities – are in danger of becoming mere patterns of consumption in order to provide solutions to the ever-growing needs of capitalism due to the existence of a patriarchal system. Pre-capitalist societies were societies built around white men's desires and liberties. Capitalist societies inherited these patriarchal characteristics. Capitalist societies needed public agents with a capacity for consumption, which meant that non-white-male subjects would have to become active agents by adhering themselves and conditioning their identities to the needs of capitalism. Furthermore, the introduction of women in the capitalist system involved a cost.

On the one hand, their inclusion as mere consumers does not provide women with a role within capitalist society able to subvert the patriarchal logic of capitalist patriarchy. On the other hand, their inclusion as both consumers and producers implies the loss of the aura for Benjamin. This loss can be understood in several manners: a) women follow patterns of consumption related to fashion and the mechanical reproduction also visible in the art within capitalism (Benjamin, 1935), this mechanical reproduction through aesthetics pushes women to lose their aura, their uniqueness; b) the loss of their uniqueness implies the victory of the organic over the inorganic and converts women in the character that best illustrates the effects of modernity; c) the figure of the sex worker is devalued by defining it as the culmination of the negative effects of modernity on women, although they have been strolling and occupying the male public sphere as means of resistance for centuries. This definition of women as victims of modernity through the lenses of Walter Benjamin implies the rejection of women as historical agents and relegates them to mere subjects upon which

history acts. Furthermore, his readings reinforce the binomial nature and woman, thus reproducing both the sexual division of labour and the sexual division of spaces.

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