

## ESRC Conference on Gender

One of the more vivid sections of Volume 1 of Capital is Marx's description of the working day. As is clear from his text, the term 'working day' is something of a misnomer since many of the people whose working hours he discusses work day and night, with little break. Marx speaks of one particular case: that of the death of a young woman seamstress who had died, as the coroner suggested 'of over-work'. Marx paints a picture of this young woman's life:

'The girl worked, on an average, 16 and a half hours during the season, often 30 hours without a break, whilst her failing labour power was revived by occasional supplies of sherry, port or coffee. It was just now the height of the season. It was necessary to conjure up in the twinkling of an eye the gorgeous dresses for the noble ladies bidden to the ball in honour of the newly imported Princess of Wales'.

In the following paragraphs Marx goes on to acknowledge that he is not alone in condemning these kind of exploitative working practices: the free traders Cobden and Bright speak of our 'white slaves' who are working to death in a thousand other places. Today's neo-liberalism has its own critics of similar practices, both in the UK or, more often, elsewhere.

What I should like to use this example for is to discuss a number of the assumptions which seem to me to be part of contemporary patterns of paid work and its gendered assumptions. The tentative thesis which I want to explore is that of the commodification of the feminine in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This follows the ground breaking work of Beverley Skeggs on the cultural capital of femininity and that of Linda McDowell on 'redundant' masculinity. What I want to suggest is that femininity, as an ideological commodity, is both deeply porous and at the same time a social characteristic which is most closely related to patterns of social mobility. When we speak of society becoming 'feminised' I would suggest that this does not mean that the social world is integrating or accepting the feminine, or achieving gender inequality, but that the feminine is becoming a crucial part of the dynamic of the social. For example, as Marx well aware the 'long hours' culture was an inherent part of industrial capitalism; in the twenty first century we tend to regard this as remarkable and evidence about it is linked to debates about work/life balance. But, 'long hours' have been part and parcel of catering industries, of various aspects of professions associated with 'care'; indeed many professions have an innate capacity to extend the hours of work with little or no question. Academics of course are an excellent example; the job need never stop and this is fully acknowledged in many of the introductions to academic texts. Most particularly in this context 'long hours' are arguably derived from feminised models of care and commitment.

Thus I would like, briefly, to look at a number of themes associated with the commodity of 'the feminine'.

1. First, to explore the question of women's relationship to 'fashion' ...a relationship which in Marx's example was brutally clear but is perhaps, in the context of the contemporary UK, rather more complex. Here I fully acknowledge the issue of those sweat shops which produce inexpensive clothing for the west : there are many who have raised the question of the political implications of the £3 pair of jeans.

We generally take the term 'fashion' to mean changes in what we wear, how we decorate our homes and so on. But fashion, when considered in the context of gender relations, has perhaps other meanings. Elsewhere in this conference the point has been made ( by Rosemary Crompton and Clare Lyonette ) that working class women were more likely to make decisions about work on the basis of economic need, whilst middle class men were more likely to raise questions about the quality of paid childcare. These findings raise their own questions about the impact of class on people's accounts of their actions : arguably the middle class are less willing to state that economic need affects their actions and middle class men are perhaps sensitive to the potential loss of 'class capital' if their children are cared for outside the nuclear family.

In these kind of instances what we see at work is the way in which class is part of a moral economy, and a moral economy which is deeply gendered. It is also, I would suggest, a moral economy which is susceptible to fashion in its broadest sense. In its more traditional aspects fashion dictates, as already suggested, aspects of our personal taste. That personal taste is now closely linked with identity and for many people with the politics of separation. Thus women are the major buyers of clothes and household appliances, acts which are about identity with some and separation from others. In this sense women's much of women's visible class identity is secured through fashion. That identity has various forms of value in the market place : endless examples from the media reinforce the social ( and economic value ) of the right kind of fashion. The example of the furious outcry about the appearance of Coleen McLoughlin on the cover of Vogue serves to remind us how much is at stake in fashion; in particular, in that sense, the determination to maintain, the scarcity, aspirational status of Vogue against incursion from a popular culture. We know from the work of Mike Savage and his colleagues that gender differences in taste are acute in terms of sport, romance and domestic interests. Evidence that women buy a high proportion of men's clothes for them suggests that we might add fashion to this list. Like many other sectors of the economy women are the major users of a sector largely controlled by men and of course a sector, the 'high street' which is of endless concern to economic pundits.

2. Fashion, we can argue, is therefore central to both our personal sense of identity and to the economy. What I should like to try and draw together is some sense of that 'potential' which Lisa Adkins mentioned in her paper : in this case the sense of 'potential' which the feminine offers to capitalism...not just in the sense of the specifically gendered form of the actual female person but in the sense of the way in which the feminised trajectory of endless personal and domestic improvement is of central importance to the health of capitalism. Any reader of fashion magazines/catalogues in the past fifty years will notice the shift towards the articulation of an ethic of self improvement which is apparently made possible through the purchase of new forms of appearance.( Recent UK television programmes include, for example, 'Ten Years Younger', 'What Not to Wear', 'Ladette to Lady'

and 'You Are What You Eat'). Through self improvement ( largely of women) , relationships within the family, and with others, are re-configured : we have heard a great deal about the decline of the male bread winner model but at the same time we hear less about the shift towards other models of domestic bliss. The economic appears to disappear, or be marginalised, as norms about marriage, the employment of women etc etc shift, yet we might also note that the class structure of the UK remains as rigid as ever. I do not think that 'love' becomes liquid in the sense that Bauman suggests but what does occur is that different values and aspirations structure personal relations. I would further add here that the moral economy of work serves capitalism well : women's professional commitment to 'care' underpins the continuing function of the social infrastructure.

3. Where that might take us is to the argument that 'fashion' in its broadest sense plays its part in the determined rigidity of class in Britain. Those most economically and educationally disadvantaged are the most disadvantaged by the pressure of 'appearance politics' ; it is the over-weight, working class single mother who is the most likely focus of demonisation : she has manifestly failed to achieve what might one have been structured as 'respectability' and is now presented in the more diffuse ( and unachievable ) terms of autonomous, well regulated femininity. In the labour market of the service industries the feminine values of care, inter-personal skills etc have an important part to play but in the context of work these values become the chains which limit women's achievement. 'Having potential' thus comes to mean being distant from the feminine.

We have, therefore, in the feminine a category which is both endlessly constructed and re-constructed for the purposes of the market and a set of capacities which are exploited in the work place . Britain has become more socially unequal and with less social mobility in the past twenty years than at any other point in recent history. Feminisation I would suggest has served very badly those most vulnerable : on the one hand a market driven celebrity culture has provided fantasies of personal achievement and emotional reward whilst so called feminine values and capacity have been annexed by aspects of the labour market, providing ghetto-ised employment from which women cannot escape. The human costs of maintaining care ( for all ages of the family ) continue to fall on women . Women, I would suggest, are increasingly faced with new demands about their person ; the collective demands of feminism for change have been marginalised and at present it would seem as if the ongoing social 'battle' for control of the concept of femininity lies firmly in the hands of those for whom the rewards of the market are greatest. The fantasy of the 'well organised' female body serves capitalism well: it generates a high level of consumer demand and maintains that relationship between capitalism and modernity which is crucial to its ideological and political progress. At the same time, the strength of this fantasy is such that it disguises the real differences between women, and between men and women. 'Performing' femininity thus has a considerable part to play in advanced capitalism ; its illusion of emancipation helps to disguise structural differences both within and between societies.

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