BORN TO SHOP?

The Left disdains consumerism. Yet women historically established themselves in the public sphere partly through department stores and shopping centres. Gillian Swanson suggests this means we need to look more seriously at the commercial sphere.

There's a story about women and the city that goes like this: they aren't there. Women don't work; women stay at home and look after children; all they can do when they go out is shop. Poor them.

It's an old story which suggests that women's domain is domestic life while men occupy public space and shape social institutions. It's true to an extent—all stories have their symbolic force, and this one provides the basis of a whole range of historical dichotomies that have been used to organise social life. But when taken literally it insinuates that women are imprisoned in the home, weighed down by domestic responsibilities and too afraid of sexual assault to venture beyond the reassuring safety of the hearth. It thereby pathologises women as victims of their bodies and compliant in their subjection and their evacuation from the streets of the city, and it simplifies the issues to suggest that all we need is creches and good street-lighting.

Clearly we do need those for more women to really have the opportunity to maximise their mobility in the city to the extent that they may wish to. But this should not stop us thinking about women's access to citizenship and public resources in ways which take account of the imaginative and complex ways that they do insert themselves into the spaces of public life. It fails to notice the ways in which many women negotiate working and home life and what lies in between, and it avoids the observation that most women care for children for less than a quarter of their lives if they have them at all. If women's relation to city life is seen only as deficient, there is no account of the specific uses and patterns of association women may already have, or wish to form—one which must lie outside a sociological index of roles and responsibilities and outside a rather perplexing assumption that their greatest aspiration is to replicate the example of men.

The conventional distinction, then, between public and private spheres forms a peculiar picture of women's social life, one that ignores the permeability of such boundaries as well as the plurality of the involvements women may have. To ignore the relation between the two—sometimes antagonistic, sometimes reciprocal—may prevent us developing a diversified picture of the forms of public life we cater for in the provision of city amenities.

So how have women found a way into city life? The mention of shopping in the story is worth noting. Not just as a feminine complement to paid employment, as work, but as an involvement which can help us trace the complex history of women's entry into city spaces and an activity which offered them a significant role in modern commerce, as consumers as well as shop workers. Women were called up to nourish the bodies and minds of the nation, to produce effective citizens through their skilful manipulation of domestic finance and market information according to
moral, as well as physical, agendas. The targeting of women as consumers was a crucial role in the formation of modern nation states and one which asked them to engage with the newest forms of commercial technology and product development. ‘Mindless consumption’ wasn’t in it. It was too important.

So when the term ‘consumer’ (usually tagged as feminine) gets used as a sign of mental evacuation, it overlooks the fact that this has a rather ambivalent history. The purchase of commodities isn’t just a sign of ideological domination and market obedience, for the individual and the family and the nation aren’t always in harmony with each other or the market, and goods don’t only have one meaning. Buying American nylons in Germany after the war didn’t mean German women wholeheartedly embraced the call to help build a hygienic femininity around a market-driven national economy, it was a statement of anti-fascism, a break in the history of national coherence, not a compliance with attempts at continuities and new alliances.

Part of the difficulty of fully understanding what consumption might mean in cultural life lies in its alliance with commerce. An interesting and topical example of the suspicion directed towards the commercial sector and its activities is currently being staged in Brisbane’s Queen Street Mall. The Brisbane City Council has disbarred the distribution of pamphlets, newspapers and the practice of spruiking, whether from inside shops or by political or interest groups, under a ‘clean-up’ campaign harnessed to the project of livability. All of these are being classed as ‘commercial’ activities (selling and hawking) and therefore subject to the licensing requirements of commercial operations, available only for a fee of $180 a week.

The movement against the clampdown on the public uses of the mall is framing its protest according to a notion of free speech and freedom of the press. The City Heart Business Association and the Brisbane City Council argue that the rights of Brisbane shoppers are infringed by such activities and their ‘traffic flow’ is impeded. The polarisation of commerce and freedom here assumes practices of consumption to be quite separate from practices of citizenship; the Council and business groups do so in order to give priority to the operations of commerce and the rights of people occupying that space in terms that charac-
theorise them as a flow of shoppers. The lobby groups, on the other hand, suggest that freedom of speech and information oppose the non-free practices of commerce that prevent inhabitants of the city fully realising their civic as opposed to their shopping selves. They also argue that no public spaces should be subject to restrictions.

But as someone put it to me recently, if no space can be secured for particular kinds of activities by proscribing others, then certain activities will never be able to take place; funerals could not proceed without the reassurance that certain demonstrations could not be permitted nearby. The point is that all activities have certain proscriptions associated with them, as those who are concerned with the safety of children and women know all too well. But not all forms of monitoring are necessarily only restrictive. Part of the problem with the commercial centres bearing on the same mall is that they do not have access to public forms of surveillance. Women suffering harassment, for instance (many female students are employed in small stores, requiring them to leave after the 'flow' has disappeared) have no routine access to police for protection since the police are only permitted to enter at the invitation of the Mall's management. It's the appropriate form for sanctioning public activities that needs addressing, rather than simply opposing any management of public space.

Mostly we exert our own processes of constraint according to the convention of appropriate conduct. We do this as part of a recognition of others existing in the same spaces and the rights they have to a level of privacy and non-interference in public. So freedom in this context is a curiously inappropriate term. It is also one that arguably dropped out of credit when it became clear that freedom of speech could not distinguish between racist and fascist forms of speech and those which laid claim to a moral (sorry, political) high ground. 'Freedom' in the case of the events of the Queen Street Mall only seems an appropriate term in opposition to a concept of the prisonhouse of commercial and governmental dominance. This does not help it lay claim to specifically civic rights, the definition of a public agenda and the development of a city culture, however plural. It simply asks that the space be vacated, to be filled by impromptu contributions made by those who feel so motivated.

The main feature of this argument over the uses of the Queen Street Mall as a public space is its invocation of the opposition between the public or civic and the commercial. Yet the claim women have made to public life, their entry into public space during the 20th century, was largely acted out in relation to commercially resourced forms of consumption. Shopping is a particularly important part of this legacy. Department stores targeted women as workers and shoppers, and thus contributed to a fundamental change in social relations that still hasn't fully registered in critical commentary in the cultural arena. For the rejection of such activities, the derogation of consumption as an activity that takes over the individual ('consumerism') has been characterised by its devaluation of tastes and activities seen as definitely feminine; undisciplined, wasteful, distracting, inauthentic and, especially, sensual at the expense of the intellect. When we give activities associated with commerce and consumption an entirely negative character, we are buying into a hierarchy based on the patterns of masculine (and paradoxically, despite contracted, a notion of the free and authentic individual) against feminine consumption as a passive, malleable and entirely responsive practice.

If, on the other hand, we consider just what women had to gain by taking up the invitation to shop, its tawdry lures might not seem so distant from this sphere of freedom. For when the New Women demanded entry into the professions and educational institutions from the 19th century onwards, an associated movement took place in the development of the consumption industries (city entertainments as much as shopping)—a link that was recognised by the newly emergent department stores. These buildings became representative of women's new public mobility; their activities as consumers took place in the most starkly modern edifices of technology and engineering which became indicative of the achievement of modern democracies.

Department stores offered not only a luxurious array of goods and services, but also spaces for all sorts of women's interests to be catered for: reading rooms, writing materials and telegraph offices, hair and manicure services, baths and health clubs, children's playgrounds and zoos, art exhibitions, lectures, and meeting places for women's organisations. Indeed, they became known as women's 'city clubs'.

On this view, then, consumption is not a discrete space where women become passive, mindless subjects of corporate dominations and the offshoots of industrial capitalism. It is rather connected to a reorganisation of women's public presence in education and work and other areas of civic life, and part of a process of the refashioning of public femininities. Perhaps more pertinently nowadays consumption can be associated with other forms of leisure which demand an equal importance for consideration in public policy concerning urban resources. In late 20th century social life, leisure activities are becoming more important for people's self-definition than the work they do.
suggests we should develop policy frameworks that move beyond the traditional distinction of public and private identities, to look at the formation of communities around different indicators in a more fluid and provisional way than work or domestic roles have suggested. By incorporating the activities associated with consumption into our civic agenda, we may find a new range of ways of addressing the uses of public spaces, as well as proposing that a more varied set of amenities be provided in exchange for the private sector's occupation of city space. In other words, we have a right to ask the commercial sector to attend to a civic agenda rather than dismissing it in favour of certain activities thought more beneficial and authoritative than others generated by commerce (i.e., leafleting, newspaper-selling and political addresses over shopping).

If shopping centres were to extend the model of the department store as a 19th century city club for women, in order to mobilise new forces of citizenship, they might begin to develop a new range of cultural resources for the city centre. Such a process starts by favouring the ways of occupying city space that women have developed, but it could also create the space for alternatives and plural uses of city resources for different groups. Breaking down the dichotomy of public and private to make an important claim to the resources of the public realm, it also begins to define forms of citizenship that go beyond that antiquated model of the white, male, property-owning citizen who defines himself according to his occupation.

In Brisbane, the civic centre of the King George Square has been replaced by the Queen Street Mall in the next street across. A river separates this commercial centre from the Cultural Centre and the South Bank Parklands, and so segregates their uses, if not their publics. Some exchange needs to take place between these public venues in order to develop a more diverse set of occupations and to enable us to rethink the relation between the commercial and the civic. Those protesting against the negative policies towards the uses of the Queen Street Mall are right to point out the need for a more diverse set of public amenities, but the rhetoric of freedom misses the opportunity to formulate specific agendas for funding access to public forms of association and social definition.

We need to explore the provision of civic amenities in association with commercial bodies, rather than hold on to the few public spaces we have against the insurgence of private ownership. This would surely offer a more positive form of engagement with the corporate sphere; that it can work to the benefit of the community interest may be shown by the use of the South Bank Parklands, partly privately owned but offering enough public territory for 100,000 people to celebrate Australia Day. It’s this kind of example that shows the bankruptcy of the notion that only publicly owned spaces can ever take on a fully public civic role. Just as department stores offered spaces that for the purposes of women entering social life were fundamentally public, the South Bank and other privately owned spaces such as shopping centres are spaces whose public natures are defined around their uses not their ownership. Privately as well as publicly-owned spaces may be governed in ways that cater to civic subjects and contribute to civic life. There is simply no reason why this interest should not form part of our urban cultural agenda. Then we could really talk about livability.

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Thank You

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