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Bodies and spaces within a Western urban context: examining the influence of the separation of public and private spheres on bodily comportment

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Abstract

Revisiting the main milestones of the slow and ineluctable separation between the private and public spheres in modern Western cities, I question the pertinence of these concepts for understanding Western 'urbanness' today. Without denying the difficulty that women face in moving through the metropolis, I will point out the initiatives that have been taken in the face of 'propriety'. I ask: to what extent have women's initiatives and small resistances/reticences been able to rework gender relations in large cities? From self-exclusion to the introduction of new positions in urban spaces, women's range of tactics is wider than theories of women's domination allow for. To what extent are young people's postures remoulding our urban environments?

Keywords

Male bodies, female bodies, public spaces, private spaces, urbanness

Reflecting on the public/private dichotomy

In the vast literature on public space(s) – which has proliferated exponentially since the end of the 1990s and sometimes reveals antagonistic positions – authors appear to agree that these notions are closely tied to the birth of the modern Western city¹. Historians such as Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby (1999), Michelle Perrot (2013) or even Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (2014), among others, have demonstrated the slow and ineluctable separation between private and public spheres in such cities. This separation began to take shape in the sixteenth century with the emergence of the notion of the individual, together with the appearance of the idea of privacy. Subtly and gradually (and more forcefully from the end of the eighteenth century), different places were designated for male and female bodies. Women were gradually confined to the domestic spheres while the exterior space of the home became the privileged space of men. Various feminist analyses (especially in geography, history, philosophy and anthropology) have emphasised that the female body has been taken over by the words of the other sex and that this situation generates in women the need to be attentive in their lone travels in urban public spaces, which are supposed to be spaces that are open and available to all. In them, many women feel a vulnerability that denotes power relations in society. In fact, as Manuel Delgado (2007, p. 225) points out,

¹ The reflections presented here are the result of ethnographic research carried out under the auspices of the multidisciplinary research project *Adoptions and Fosterages in Spain: Tracing Challenges, Opportunities and Problems in the Social and Family Lives of Children and Adolescents*, 2013-2015, directed by Diana Marre (AFIN – Childhood, Families – Research Group <http://grupsderecerca.uab.cat/afin>). They also owe a lot to my exchanges with my students and colleagues at the schools of architecture of Toulouse and Marseille, where I teach courses that reflect on the notions of public space(s). While I cannot name individually the people who have contributed to my thinking, I note here my heartfelt thanks to all.

even today, the descriptor 'of the street' does not have the same effect when applied to a woman and a man. The phrase a 'woman of the street' does not summon the same imagery as 'a man of the street'. A public man is not equivalent to a public woman. The modifier does not have the same connotation when applied to men as when applied to women: it exalts men, propelling them to the rank of citizen, while it lowers women, reducing them to the category of prostitute. Additionally, Delgado continues: "The opposite of a public woman is a private woman. Not a woman who enjoys private life, but rather a woman who is the private property of a man and is accessible only to him" (2007, pp. 226-227; my translation)²; she is, therefore, a woman whose movements in the city are carefully monitored and controlled. Among these studies, some authors even hold that European cities would be very different if gender relations (that is, the power relations that take hold between beings who are sexually differentiated, constructed as 'men' and 'women') had developed differently.

Begun in the seventeenth century, the remodelling of public spaces – toward the patterns that we know today – restructured the city architecturally and socially: streets were widened and freed of a multitude of objects and activities that had occupied them in the old regime, in order to turn them into axes of circulation; parks were open to the public and squares took new shape and permitted large assemblies that brought together people from very diverse backgrounds. Within housing, changes are also taking place, particularly with the desire to delimit more precisely areas and their functions. Homes are subdivided with parts reserved for shared activities and others for more intimate ones. The invention of corridors around 1750 allowed the passage from one room to another and almost simultaneously the distinction between rooms for adults and children appeared. Researchers interested in the history of housing also tell us that it was not until the nineteenth century that single beds appeared in urban dwellings. Prior to this, it was common for several people to share a bed. As for the individual child's room, this is a twentieth-century invention that is gradually becoming an ideal for all social classes, even if it is not always feasible for less well-off sections of the population. Spaces dedicated to children multiplied with the construction of schools (in response to the duty to educate young people) and parks that became new focal points of neighbourhoods. The movement of boys and girls in the streets became subject to increasing scrutiny. In this way, in line with the growth of these large modern cities, and in spite of the slogan of the French Revolution (liberty, fraternity, equality), bourgeois women and their children were gradually relegated to the family residence. If they wanted to go out, there had to be a valid reason that contributed to the wellbeing of the family (going to the market, doing laundry, taking children to school or the park, etc.). Neither women nor children could stay out in the streets; this was considered a sign of poor upbringing. Indeed Dominique Gauzin-Müller (2015) explains that the first children's areas were created at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in the large European and North American cities with the aim of channelling the energy of the children of the popular classes. The idea was to use these spaces to teach them codes of good conduct, that is, the rules of urban civility. In the same way, Ann Marie F. Murnaghan (2016) shows how the constructions of playgrounds affected children's bodies in the early twentieth century in Toronto.

The dominant imagery that accompanied the foundation of the beginning of the great metropolises seems to have represented the street as the place of danger. In these portraits, the context of 'dominant misogyny' is often emphasised, attributing to women not only muscular weakness but also an endemic mental vulnerability that would have prevented them from confronting urban peril. Reference is then made to the street as risky, full of hypocrisy and of unpredictable encounters, apt to pervert even the most morally upright. In this context, women and children could not move without the benevolent eye and muscular

² "Lo contrario de una mujer pública es una *mujer privada*. No una mujer que disfruta de vida privada, sino una mujer que es propiedad privada de un hombre y accesible sólo para él" (Delgado, 2007, pp. 226-227; he underlines).

arm of a male (in the case of women) or an adult (in the case of children). From this viewpoint, women and children were considered to be frivolous and naive by 'nature', incapable of avoiding the traps and tricks of urban life. The street then appeared to represent a real danger for any woman or child, as made clear in manuals of good behaviour and polite etiquette from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These *savoir-vivre* books aimed to transform any woman into the perfect 'housewife', recommending to its readers not to expose themselves to the risk of losing their reputations, leaving the field open to men supposedly more capable of facing the threats of urban disorder. This model was hegemonic and was able to spread effectively both in the aristocracy and the popular classes, creating ever-clearer separations between the interior and the exterior of homes, between private and shared spaces. And all of these terms qualified the public *versus* private dichotomy in ways that were not strictly equivalent, as Jean Remy (2001, p. 23) remind us, when he writes that the polysemy of these two terms becomes obvious as soon as the descriptive use of the terms is exceeded, that is, when public spaces are no longer posed as mere synonyms of streets or squares potentially accessible to all. The public and the private have different realities depending on the period but also on national traditions, something that this author demonstrates clearly when he compares the French and English realities.

Looking from the other side of the mirror

Faced with this reclusion of women and children, some authors posit that urbanisation coincides with the intensification of patriarchy. From this point of view, a *flâneur* could only be a man, just like the other 'heroes' of the modern city (foreigner, emigrant) who shared with him the perspective and possibility of travelling alone, voluntary uprooting and arriving anonymously in a new space. Thus, as has been explained many times, Georges Sand dressed as a man in order to stroll around in leisurely fashion. Public spaces in cities, therefore, seem to be a predominantly male domain occupied by men. Accordingly, it became necessary to adopt masculine postures and a masculine dress to have access to it, as indicated, for the French case, by an Ordonnance of 7 November 1800 (*16 brumaire, year IX*) which prohibited women from wearing trousers and obliged those who wished to 'dress as men' to present themselves to the Police Prefecture to obtain a *licence de travestissement* (a licence to cross-dress); this was the subject of debate because some felt that these authorizations were likely to harm women's mental health.

However, another reading of the urban life of this period allows us to nuance the idea that modern cities intensify patriarchy. Thus Elizabeth Wilson (1991, p. 56) does not consider the *flâneur* as a model of masculinity. Instead, she presents him as a figure of transgression, similar to the (female) dandy artists analysed by Gloria Durán Hernández-Mora (2009). As such, he is seen as a sexually undefined being, a passive spectator; exactly the opposite of the active participation, associated with the male attitude. His interest in dress and shopping could make the *flâneur* a troubling being of feminized masculinity, just as the (female or male) dandy break with the bourgeois ideology, which considers men and women as equals. The phenomenon of dandyism was created through the blurring of gender boundaries:

The dandies would pose, wandering through the streets in a showy fashion, performing all the while how they wanted to be seen, beings without a predetermined, rigid sexual identity, no definite and fixed gender, no clearly established and legitimate social or productive function (Durán, 2009, pp. 689-690; my translation)³.

³ "Los dandys han posado, rondado por las calles, simulado grandes maneras, y actuado de modo permanente para ser tomados por lo que quieren ser, cosas sin un sexo concreto, ni un género definido y fijo, ni una función social o productiva claramente establecida y legitimada" (Durán, 2009, pp. 689-690).

Such readings might allow us to think that the birth of modern cities was to be liberating for women too. Yet, it is difficult to know about these women's experiences because very few traces have been recorded, for many decades discourse about urbanness has been dominated by male writers and thinkers. Writing in the mid-1980s, Janet Wolff (1985) stressed that modern sociology was not interested in women's experiences of urban life⁴. A decade later, Jacqueline Coutras (1996, p. 98) examined the work of authors who draw on the studies of Robert Park, Georg Simmel, Louis Wirth and Gabriel Tarde to analyse interactions in public spaces. She noted that they attributed grammatical masculinity to figures that did not have an identifiable gender (the foreigner, the nightwalker, the adventurer, the flâneur, etc. all have a masculine inflection in the original texts)⁵. Today, if the situation has improved somewhat, only a few studies interested in these topics distance themselves consciously from the biases I have just mentioned⁶.

For Elizabeth Wilson (1991), women in cities, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, actually enjoyed much greater freedom than we are led to believe because, in the heart of big cities, the hierarchies that exist in small cities or villages are attenuated. This process enables women to experience the rootlessness and freedom of movement that characterize the metropolis. According to this author, in the middle of the crowd, a woman would have been protected by the anonymity described so well by Colette Pétonnet (1987) as necessary and constitutive of urbanity; this anonymity which permitted her to explore the urban context in her own way. But the question remains open: what were and are the specifically female ways of dealing with urban spaces? Janet Wolff (1985) claims that the vast literature on the fleeting and transitory nature of encounters, considered to be characteristic of the metropolis, does not apply to the majority of women's experiences. What, then, are their experiences? How are they lived? These are the questions that historians of the city need to answer, as do social researchers who carry out fieldwork in the new urban configurations within which our current lives are taking place. Catherine Nesci's (2007) work on nineteenth-century *flâneuses* is extremely rich from this point of view. Analysing the literary works of women writers, whom she does not hesitate to describe as urban ethnographers, she questions the conditions of inclusion and exclusion of women in public life in the Romantic era, showing how the woman-object created by the *flâneur* rebels was to become not a looked-at object but a subject doing the looking.

Changing places to negotiate their spot...

For many years, and, indeed, even today, women's self-exclusion from certain public places could be understood as a tactic to avoid exposing themselves to unpleasant situations. Or because their upbringing prohibited it. Or because when women dare(d) to enter such spaces, the looks that they receive(d) from men make/made them feel unwelcome. As Erving Goffman (1977) clearly expressed, the polarization between the sexes is a social process that makes it possible to justify unequal treatment. When these inequalities become

⁴ As far as I know, there is at least one valid exception that appears to confirm the rule: a series of texts by Georg Simmel written between 1908 and 1918 in which he analyses women's relationship with space and which are included in the second volume of texts translated into French under the title *Philosophie de la Modernité*.

⁵ Another exception to the rule is given to us by the great theorist of public relationships, Erving Goffman. In a little-known article from 1977, he shows that male and female roles are not consequences of biological differences but rather the result of social processes (see: Goffman E. 1977, *The Arrangement between the Sex*, «Theory and Society» 4/3, pp. 301-331).

⁶ Among the texts that analyse the socio-historical process of gender differentiation, that of Irene Théry (2007) particularly caught my attention. This author speaks of sex distinction (and not gender distinction) in order to distance herself from the theories that place the idea of domination at the centre of reflection. For her, this notion is not productive because it confuses power, authority and inequality which deserve to be approached separately for the understanding of the linking of the sexes in a given society at a particular moment (see: Théry I. 2007, *La distinction de sexe: une nouvelle approche de l'égalité*, Ed. Odile, Paris).

unacceptable, discourses about sex differences can become diluted. However, the sexualisation of space has not managed to completely undermine the virtues of urban space. The main advantage of modern urban life lies in that it gives city dwellers the freedom to choose how they want to be, liberating them from community pressures and the 'prison' of traditions.

Women have not waited to be included in the world of work in order to enter in public spaces. In fact, they never wholly stopped frequenting public spaces. Although it is undeniable that bourgeois ideology had significant repercussions for women's use of urban spaces during the nineteenth century and well into the second half of the twentieth century, women did not stay at home.

As mentioned above, they visited the city streets to carry out their household chores, even if their presence was not synonymous with visibility during these domestic errands. Bourgeois women and their employees in particular frequented public spaces to better serve the family, and female workers moved through the city in order to go to work. Their legitimacy in public spaces was circumscribed by the space assigned to the family: the residential space. Numerous women today do not appear to have been able to separate themselves from such tasks, and their urban trajectories continue to be heavily influenced by their roles as 'house' wife, a role fulfilled increasingly on a part-time basis, which they combine with paid work and other obligations of contemporary life. Women's itineraries seem to perpetuate themselves, remaining remarkably similar: routes shaped by shopping, school, the park, etc. The entrances of schools and supermarkets continue to be spaces that are predominately frequented by women, from where women cognitively organize their mental maps of urban space. Thus, although women are less confined to interior spaces, their sexual identity still has an important role when they move in public spaces.

It would seem then that women's presence in public spaces undermines their right to enjoy the benefits of anonymity that preside in relationships among strangers in these places. Women do not appear to benefit from anonymity in the same way that men do. Paradoxically, in the street or in the square, the same woman that is 'invisibilised' as a social subject, suffers from 'hypervisibilisation' as an object of attention. Catcalls, invitations to a coffee or a walk, winks, and gallantries are some of these marks of excess attention.

Nonetheless, in today's public spaces it is possible to observe young women who act in ways that are very different from how their mothers or grandmothers act(ed)⁷. While Michel Fize (2010) does not dedicate a chapter of his book on contemporary adolescent girls to this topic, he allows us to glimpse these changes throughout his analysis. Small groups of girls – or girls and boys – sit on the arms or backs of park benches, or on the ground of the square, or on the floor in the metro. They lie down on the grass to embrace each other. And none of this makes them uncomfortable. In analysing the transformations of postures on public benches, Michèle Jolé (2002) stresses that, by acting in this way, young people are changing habitual postures. They experience perform new ways of taking a rest that are also an attitude, a form of posing in the city, exposing their bodies in public. It would seem that these new codes are undoing old taboos; or do these habits merely reveal the young age of these city dwellers? As they grow older, will they leave these postures behind and move on to apparent 'normalcy'? To what extent are new articulations of gender being negotiated in today's urban spaces and in what way do they force us to rethink our conception of these spaces?

⁷ The urban planner Melissa Côté-Douyon (2015) clearly highlights this in her analysis of the attitudes of young girls in streets and squares in Hanoi. Her work is part of a broader study looking at the use of public spaces by young Hanoians. In it, image capture plays an important role in documenting changes in body attitudes (<http://www.hanoiyouthpublicspace.com/>).

Although I cannot answer these questions here, I would like nonetheless to raise the importance of paying attention to the agency of all individuals, that is their creative capacity to distance themselves from socially-established rules. Rather than feeding the discourses that emphasise the submission of bodies to patriarchal laws, I think that it is more fruitful to observe and analyse what Fabiana Dultra and Paola Berenstein (2008) call 'corpographies'⁸ that display the resistance of bodies to the hostility of places, in order to construct a city that responds to the necessities of pedestrians.

...and opening new paths

Spaces are born from power relations. Power relations establish norms, and the norms set both spatial and social limits⁹. However, spaces are also affected by use. I turn to Michel De Certeau's subsection 'Spatial Practices' of his chapter entitled 'Walking in the city' (2011, pp. 99-110). He writes that in daily life, men and women of the crowd come and go, circulate, overflow and drift off the course that has been imposed on them, but which they adopt and use according to their understanding. Urban walkers give life to a city, "nomadic or metaphorical, that insinuates itself into the clear text of the planned and legible city" (De Certeau, 2011, p.97). They take advantage of accidents of the landscape, adapting to and altering their surroundings. They skirt the boulders of institutional networks, eroding and moving them without the official order noticing. Their tactics and combinations of power, without legible identity or rational transparency, are impossible to confront. Places of passage are 'spatial conformations'. The ability to move spatializes the framework of places, de Certeau explains.

Women's urban tactics allow female city dwellers to transgress the established uses of urban spaces and invent particular ways of appropriating and reinventing their spaces. As Thierry Paquot writes, "Every city is gendered, it's up to the people who live there to make sure it's shared!"; (2015, p.129; my translation)¹⁰. Paquot insists that, even if gender inequalities are inherent in cities, inhabitants have the agency to affect the established order and thus to foster the sharing of public spaces. The actions of taking one's place in, accessing, and using urban space bring about changes in relations between roles. Continuing to insist on young women's and girls' right to the city has an impact on the attitudes of men. It generates a negotiation of closed spaces and conflictive crossings through forms of resistance to and transgression of hegemonic practices. A woman can do this via tactics such as avoidance, but also by standing up with her body, with her presence, although this may mean facing fear in the daily use of urban space. Men and women then have to reinterpret and renegotiate new values that alter established gender relations.

Certainly, women do continue to benefit from the liberating effects of cities, although at the same time, they may experience economic and social exclusion. The contemporary Western city has weakened the bond that ties one sex to the space of the residence and the other to its exterior (although not exclusively), but it has not severed it. Will the city of the twenty-first century make it possible to 'desexualise' the public/private distinction, that is, to separate the definition of the spheres from roles of the sexes? Will it continue to be pertinent to distinguish between public and private spheres in order to understand the urbanness of the future? Will

⁸ These two authors, reflecting on the possible relationships between body and city, distinguish 'corpography' from cartography and choreography. While inspired by both these notions, corpography is neither a fusion of them, nor a bodily form of cartography or choreography that imposes itself on a space. The corpography analyses the movements of city dwellers with respect to their urban surroundings, understanding them as united and inseparable.

⁹ Lise Nelson (1999) makes this point in her critique of Judith Butler's concept of performativity, where the emphasis is put on the potential of individuals to reinvent themselves, without taking into account that this takes place within networks of socio-spatial and temporal relations. My thanks to Claire Bullen for having brought this article to my attention.

¹⁰ "Toute ville est genrée, aux habitants de faire en sorte qu'elle soit partagée!" (Paquot, 2015, p. 129).

the initiatives of young women be capable of modifying the “hypercorporisa[ti]on of] subaltern bodies, which are always feminised and racialised” (Valcuende del Río & Vasquez Andrade, 2016, p. 307; my translation)¹¹?

Elizabeth Wilson suggests that the discourse about the hostility of the city towards women encourages paternalism. She argues that problems of coexistence in cities require a different focus that necessarily involves the broad recognition of freedom and autonomy for all classes and groups:

We need a radically new approach to the city. We will never solve the problems of living in cities until we welcome and maximise the freedom and autonomy they offer and make these available to all classes and groups. We must cease to perceive the city as a dangerous and disorderly zone from which women – and others – must be largely excluded for their protection (Wilson, 1991, p.9).

We need to pay attention to small initiatives that may carry major changes in the future. Among them, we should keep in mind the changes brought about by the use of information and communication technologies that radically modify our relationship to space and that are rearticulating the notions of public, private, and domestic. We can see this tendency in collective works such as the special issue of the French journal *Ethnologie Française* on adolescents, with contributions by Céline Metton (2010), Anne Jarrigeon and Joëlle Menrath (2010) which analyse the impact of the cell phone on adolescents’ socialization and which show that today’s young people are more connected than ever to the outside world, despite the parental tendency to lock them up at home. From their room, cell phone in hand, they blur the boundaries between inside and outside, between public and private life. Their relationship to spaces is not the same as that of their grandparents, in the same way that their relationship to the world is not the same as that of their parents. The research group ‘Urban Culture’ directed by Francisco Cruces (2016) documents the porosity that has emerged between the public and private spheres in and outside our homes. People encountered within this study were constantly moving along blurred boundaries that were shifting without cease. In what way will the agency of current generations connected by digital technologies change the links between us? Against the backdrop of controversial debates about youth people and digital media, rather than seeing this generation as one that is lost and misplaced, I consider them rather as powerful mechanisms capable of changing our relationship with the world. This does not mean that previous generations have nothing to do or say, because, as neurosciences and environmental psychology explain, the context and qualities of relationships between beings have a significant impact on our brains and therefore our ways of understanding and conceiving the world (Cyrulnik, 1989). It is up to us (young and not so young) to reflect on the quality of the links that we wish to establish between us, because attachments are not imposed on us from the outside. We impose them implicitly or explicitly on ourselves on a daily basis through our words, gestures, actions, and reactions (Latour, 2000). Negotiations on gender differentiation thus involve our attitudes, our poses (or even our pauses in public spaces) which, in turn, have a significant impact on the configuration of our living spaces.

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¹¹ “hipercorporiza[ci]ón de] los cuerpos subalternos, siempre feminizados y racializados” (Valcuende del Río & Vasquez Andrade, 2016, p. 307)

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