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## **The sociocultural pervasiveness of fashion and its relationship to identity. A philosopher’s approach**

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Fashion has always been an elusive phenomenon. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century it has become a pervasive one as well.

The *elusiveness* of fashion – its resistance to conceptualization, may be regarded as the result of a number of variables working within an empty social form, whose only nature consists in giving shape to an ambivalent dynamic of social distinction and assimilation. As Georg Simmel observed, the social form of fashion is marked by this intrinsic ambivalence: it works simultaneously as a way to assimilate and to distinguish oneself, generally through aesthetic creativity.

In turn, the contemporary *pervasiveness* of fashion may be explained as the result of the confluence of structural changes in society, with some cultural ideas inherited from late-modernity. In some cases, these ideas have given place to “post-modern attitudes”, which put great emphasis on the relationship between fashion and identity. However, I would like to defend the view that post-modern attitudes are not the only factors influencing contemporary fashion-behavior.

In either case, it is true, as has often been pointed out, that fashion – as an aesthetic way of social distinction and assimilation - presents some affinities with the process of modernization, both from a structural and a cultural point of view. This is not to deny the existence of fashion at other times of history, but only to stress a salient fact: fashion is perhaps most recognizable in modernity because it is in modernity when it acquires a certain autonomy – due both to changes in the social structure and to the influence of cultural ideals on social agents.

Later I will point out the basic structural and cultural changes that have made room for the development of fashion. First, it is helpful, to take a closer look at its elusive nature.

### **1. The elusiveness of fashion**

As I have just noted, the elusiveness of fashion can be explained as the result of certain variables working within an “empty social form”, whose only apparent function seems to be to maintain the dynamics of social distinction and assimilation.

The first variable involved in this social form, and adding to its elusiveness, is the fact that *fashion is essentially transitory*: by its very (lack of) nature, fashion exists “in the present”. Indeed, although there are long-term fashions, the very concept of fashion

implies provisionality: this is why it opposes commitment. Thus, the more commitment some activity or ideal requires, the more endurance an object calls for, the less subject to fashion it is. Accordingly, while every human activity can be affected by fashion, there are some items, such as clothing, which, once deprived of substantive traditional connotations, become more suitable to enter into the dynamic of fashion – which is a dynamic of play. By this I mean the fact that fashion entails rules and imagination.

“*Play*” is a second variable accounting for the elusiveness of fashion because of the relevant role of imagination in it. Generally speaking, play involves the variation of elements under the guidance of the imagination, yet always within certain rules. In fact, there can no play without either rules or imagination, and because it involves both, we can say that fashion is a kind of play. Indeed, the game of fashion can be played at different levels.

Now - who sets the rules of fashion? It seems to me that these rules are always a matter of *social convention*. This involves two things: first, and foremost, it means that there is no fashionable behavior outside society, that is, apart from reference to others, from some group of reference. And, secondly, it means that fashionable behaviors require a sort of common language. In other words, fashion requires a set of conventional rules plus a set of shared meanings. This meaningful background is unavoidable if we want to speak of fashion at all. In its absence, we could not even talk of anti-fashionable behavior.

At the same time, that meaningful background holds a certain degree of conventionality, which adds another element of variability to the elusiveness of fashion. There was a time in which the conventional rules of fashion were set in the court. Pre-modern fashion – or fashions, since there were as many fashions as courts - was consequently a closed game: only a few people were really involved in it. Nowadays it seems that the game has been opened to all consumers, although not everybody takes part in it with equal intensity. In contrast to the usually personal origin of pre-modern fashion, it is not clear who sets the rules now. Sometimes one could say it is the designers; yet, at other times, it is said that the rules are set by certain stylish people in certain stylish cities, in a rather spontaneous way.

In either case, it is one thing to spark a particular fashion, and a different matter to set the rules of the (general) play of fashion. In contrast to the individual nature of creativity, the latter is always a social matter. In our case, one is tempted to say that the market ultimately sets the rules of fashion. This, I acknowledge, is not to say much, for, at least at first sight, the market seems quite an anonymous machine. From another perspective, however, it is not that anonymous, since it is ultimately activated by economic agents, who are simultaneously human agents.

Be that as it may, the game of fashion can only develop on the basis of conventional rules, and these, in turn, require a certain detachment from fixed, traditional meanings. Where there is a rigid social structure, or little social change, there is not much room for fashion in clothing: in that situation, clothing is particularly supposed to reflect that structure. Yet as soon as clothing is deprived of such structural connotations, it becomes one of those items, which, because of their lack of content and provisionality, have more affinity to fashion, and consequently to play.

In fact, dealing properly with clothes involves some openness to fashion. It is not by chance that those who, for religious reasons, choose to abandon the secular world of appearances usually mark their commitment by acquiring a fixed robe – thereby renouncing fashion. Though in a negative way, this attitude reflects a deep insight into the nature of fashion, for being open to fashion is a sign of being in the world. Of course, being in the world does not merely entail some openness to play but also to work. In fact, we could hardly understand play without work. Both categories belong together. The interesting point is that work, too, finds expression in clothing: thus, those who commit themselves to certain professions show this commitment by wearing a uniform – thereby marking the limit between the seriousness of their work and the playfulness of fashion.

Generally speaking, dealing properly with clothing entails a kind of wisdom that consists of distinguishing between the changeable and the unchangeable, the amusing and the serious. For those who share this knowledge, clothing represents a language, a sort of bodily reflection of an interior attitude. Diplomats are supposed to understand this language. More generally, Simmel is right when he says that, on a daily basis, women have a more correct attitude towards fashion than men do. They know that they can play with fashion: unlike other things in life, fashion is actually something to play with.

## **2. The pervasiveness of fashion**

While the previous reflections refer to the phenomenon of fashion as such, what has been called the “system of fashion” cannot be thought of separate from the transformations undergone by European society as a result of the industrial revolutions and subsequent transformations of the economy – particularly, the transition from productive capitalism to consumer capitalism. This latter move has been held accountable for the contemporary boost and pervasiveness of fashion.

In tracing this connection, fashion is no longer thought of as an isolated phenomenon or an abstract form of socialization, but rather as part of a system – the system of fashion, which simultaneously embraces both economic and aesthetic elements. At this point, however, we should be careful not to mix two different logics, both of which are involved in our experience of fashion. For, while it is true that fashion can be regarded as an element within an economic system, it is also true that not everything in fashion responds to economic reasons.

Again, Georg Simmel may be a guide in this. For, along with his explicit reflections on fashion, his theory of modernity provides us with an insight into the reasons for its growing pervasiveness in the last century, namely: the increasing differentiation of modern society.

In clear contrast to traditional societies, modern society is highly differentiated in two significant and distinct ways. As we know, social theorists of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century insisted on the increasing “social differentiation” derived from the division of labor, the dynamics of which were being accelerated by the process of industrialization.

It was Simmel who first called our attention to the fact of “individual differentiation”. By this we mean the fact that modern social differentiation, insofar it has introduced more fragmentation in society, has indirectly resulted in the creation of spaces of freedom for the individual. Consequently, he or she can no longer be understood as merely the member of a single group, or a single community; she can no longer be approached as merely a professional, or a family member, for she is somehow forced to be all these things and many other ones. In other words: the development of her subjectivity is no longer identical with her affiliation to a single group, for she actually belongs to many different ones. Accordingly, she has but to develop a personal response to her unparalleled position in society, and consequently achieve a personal synthesis of her background and projects.

Both transformations in social structure are relevant in explaining the diffusion of fashion in modern society, yet not in the same way. Thus, while the division of labor, and the functional differentiation derived thereof may account for the connection between fashion and the economy, the connection between fashion and identity can be understood only from the perspective of “individual differentiation”. The reason for this is that individual differentiation – itself a result of changes in the social structure – nevertheless opens a space for individual freedom, which can only be filled by individual responsibility. In other words, individual differentiation opens up the gate for cultural ideals, which are also relevant for understanding the contemporary pervasiveness of fashion. In this way, individual differentiation entails an ethical requirement for the individual: the development of an individual personality.

### **3. Fashion and changes in the social structure**

As Adam Smith observed, the division of labor is a crucial element in the development of an industrial society. The industrial revolution, in turn, accelerated the process leading to modern social differentiation, which – unlike pre-modern social differentiation – is essentially based on professional work.

#### *a) Functional differentiation as the basis of the relationship between fashion and the economy*

Herbert Spencer was one of the theorists of industrial society, which he approached from an evolutionary perspective. He thought that, as with organic beings, social growth was linked to the increasing differentiation of social functions, whose final integration was expected to happen in a rather spontaneous way, as the systematic harmonization of functions. While the way to this “liberal utopia” would involve leaving behind those less adapted to survive – “social Darwinism” – the very economic growth derived from industry was expected to enhance and *shape* the desires of the remaining victorious individuals thus increasing their opportunities for intellectual and aesthetic growth.

Spencer’s evaluation of industrial society is not far from Marx’s own diagnosis. Division of labor plus industry leads to an increase in production, which makes possible an increase of leisure. Yet, in order to keep production going, we have to stimulate consumption. Fashion is a means of doing so. In fact, many contemporary approaches to fashion have come to think of it merely in these terms. Let us note that this stimulus can be applied to every item – not just clothing. We consequently see fashions come and go

in everything, nearly all stimulating consumption. Why is this so? At first sight this happens simply because fashion adds something alluring - for instance, sheer novelty - to the material goods that are at the basis of the economic process. As Aristotle observed, “some things please us while they are still new, and later no longer do, because at first our mind is excited, and exercises an intense activity in relation to them” (NE, X, 4, 1175 a 8-10). This explains the role that fashion has acquired in the modern capitalist economy. Although many fashions appear as spontaneously as always, we are drawn to conclude that the rapid succession of fashions is deliberately sought as a powerful stimulus to consumption. This explains also why creativity has become so valued by the fashion industry: it introduces novelty.

In addition, always with an eye to stimulating consumption, the fashion industry has also learned to exploit the social dynamic that lie at the heart of fashion – the dynamic of imitation and distinction - by playing not merely with forms and colors, but also with meanings and values that some “distinguished” people – unlike the not-distinguished ones - associate with certain objects. Indeed, a way to stimulate consumption nowadays is by “enriching” material goods with meanings and values that go far beyond the satisfaction of any material need. One may wonder why human subjects actually do this - projecting values and meanings upon material objects - why they do not remain satisfied with a functional, sober approach to their needs. Yet, while it is true that this “projection” can be overdone, to the point of “fetishism”, the truth is that, to a certain extent, human beings cannot do otherwise. This has to do with the fact that we are reflective and social beings.

Reflection makes it possible to attribute layers of meanings and values to the simplest objects. Let us take a simple pen: it is an instrument useful for writing; this is its function. This simple pen, however, happens to be the one used by President Kennedy when signing a particular piece of legislation. When I use it I may be aware of this connection. Perhaps I happen to use it because of that connection, since I admired President Kennedy so much. Perhaps I do not have the chance to use that pen, but I happen to know its brand, and I buy one with the idea that President Kennedy used a similar one. This is not the whole story, since it may well happen that, as I write, I do not merely want to fill up a blank sheet with my writing: perhaps I want to recall President’s Kennedy’s act of writing. At this point I may be completely crazy, but there is no doubt that reflection can operate throughout this mimetic process: instead of simply using a pen to write a paper, I would be recalling a universe of social connections.

The fashion industry has also learned to exploit this reflective process. Thus, for many people fashion is not just a matter of “aesthetics” – not in the pure sense of the term - but rather a matter of meanings and subjective values, very often approached in a highly conscious and ironic way. All this may help to understand the way in which fashion helps not only to foster desires for consumption, but also *shape* them, to the point of leaving aside completely any “natural basis” of consumption.

Still, in interpreting fashion merely as an element of the ever more complicated economic process, this approach seems to leave out many other factors that we deem relevant in any complete account of the phenomenon of fashion. Particularly – and in spite of all the emphasis on the subjective projection of meanings and values - this approach does not allow for a flexible account of the relationship between fashion and

identity, that is, an account that leaves room for different ways of relating to fashion, not merely on a consumption basis. This is partly because the very approach to social differentiation, on which this view is based, is itself unilateral.

*b) Individual differentiation at the basis of the relationship between fashion and identity*

While Spencer is right in highlighting the acceleration of social differentiation in the context of industrial society, his overall approach is one-sided. Not every aspect of professional work can be grasped from a merely functional perspective nor can social integration be expected to take place spontaneously by itself. As Emile Durkheim rightly insisted, social cohesion requires ethical norms. Certainly, social cohesion under modern conditions cannot simply take the form it had in traditional societies. In Durkheim's view, at the basis of the ethical norms of modern society is precisely the division of labor, insofar it requires co-operation. In speaking of a new form of "solidarity", emerging from modern conditions, Durkheim moderated the strongly individualistic and aristocratic connotations of Spencer's liberal utopia.

Durkheim was aware that the process of modernization entails a process of individualization, so that modern "collective conscience" is almost reduced to the "cult of the individual". At the same time, he recognizes the presence of "social ethics" demanding co-operation and solidarity from every individual. The lack of harmony between norms, functions and individual motives is for him at the basis of the ethical fractures of modern society – that is, of anomy.

Georg Simmel's particular contribution to the reflection on modern society has to do precisely with the ways in which social co-operation helps foster individual differentiation, without renouncing the positive side of individualism. Simmel's point involves discovering the ways in which the division of labor, the development of a monetary economy, and, ultimately, the intersection of social circles, in which every modern individual is forced to live, open spaces of indetermination for the individual, exclude the complete identification of one person with a single group – as was the case in traditional societies – and ultimately foster the development of an individual, differentiated identity.

Accordingly, individual differentiation – which is itself a result of changes in the social structure - opens up a space for individual freedom, and social structure becomes porous to one of the most characteristic ideals of contemporary culture, namely that of authenticity.

#### **4. Fashion and identity: the cultural point of view**

In the longing for an original and authentic self, Simmel discovered one of the aspirations of the modern individual, to be matched with his/her desire for political equality. While he saw the latter as the inheritance of 18<sup>th</sup> Century "quantitative individualism", he regarded the former as the inheritance of diverse artistic and philosophical trends of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, most significantly the Romantic longing for one's true self, and Nietzsche's ethics of distinction.

The individuals Simmel observes at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century are not exactly Romantic types. Living as they were in a highly industrialized society, they could hardly indulge in Romantic spontaneity. While they still valued their subjectivity, and tried therefore to contest the homogenizing trends of their times, they found it hard to recognize themselves in nature. Leaving the city was no longer an option for them. In fact, the Romantic ideal of *Bildung*, consisting of the reconciliation of nature and freedom in one's own subjectivity, seems lost forever. In the conditions of a technical, cultural world, increasingly alienated from its human author, that Romantic longing could only feed a tragic feeling about human destiny.

Simmel was aware of this alienation as he referred to the "tragedy of culture" – that is, the lack of correspondence and synchronization between objective and subjective culture. In doing so he was picking up a characteristically Nietzschean theme. It was Nietzsche who first formulated a critique of the Romantic ideal of *Bildung*, and suggested an alternative solution for preserving a sense of one's self in the conditions of modern life. His proposal no longer required the development of *Bildung*, but rather the acquisition of *style*.

In Nietzsche's view, style – not to be confused with fashion - is a strategy the subject develops to keep control of the situation, avoiding the invasion of the outside world into the realm of one's subjectivity. From this it is clear that having style involves a strong will. It is therefore not a matter for everybody, but for human beings completely in charge of themselves.

According to Simmel, individuals living in the cities of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, running the risk of becoming just an interchangeable cog of the huge social machine, were bound to find Nietzsche's aristocratism attractive. In the development of "style", they discovered a way to preserve an individual sense of themselves, and control their manifestation. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, *style* seemed the last refuge of a subject who struggled to resist complete functional homogenization<sup>1</sup>.

Nietzsche's resort to style, as one mark of the superior human being, may be considered unrealistic and one-sided. In Simmel's view, Nietzsche represents the exaltation of humanity before society. To the extent that identity is linked with society, the Nietzschean individual has to resist his identification with any social group, with any group of reference. He cannot accept other definitions except the one he gives himself. Nevertheless, as it turns out, this stylized version of human subjectivity has trouble resisting the impact of consumer society.

In the light of subsequent history, we might be led to think that this supposedly last refuge of the subject did not resist the attack of objective culture. In many cases, it certainly seems as if the advance of capitalist society has fulfilled the dark prognosis of

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the general relevance of style as a mark of one's own personality is a feature of modern culture. This is not to say that people in pre-modern era had no style nor interest in style. In pre-modern times having a personal – as opposed to a *class*- style was not deemed that important in terms of one's social identity. Social identity developed from other sources. Pre-modern individuals did not have to worry much about their own personal style. In any event, they did not experience it as a matter of self-definition or self-discovery, as a matter of achieving or expressing one's own identity. Their social identity came as a matter of course through the quite fixed position they had in their society right from birth. Tradition provided the background against which one individual would develop his/her taste. By contrast, modern individuals came to think of identity as a task to be achieved through personal effort. Romantic thinkers summarized this effort in a word: *Bildung*. Yet, *Bildung* was an overly ambitious ideal, which became unrealizable as industrial society imposed conforming trends upon all individuals. At this stage, the only way to preserve a sense of one's self is style.

Max Weber: “from the spirit of capitalism to capitalism without spirit”. In this way, the transition from productive capitalism to consumer capitalism has finally succeeded in invading with its products the fortress of subjectivity – to the point of actually shaping people’s desires far beyond all natural expectations. Significant in this context is the fact that the pages devoted to “Style” in most newspapers and magazines deal with consumer goods – as if having style were mostly a matter of having certain items. Has style perhaps not surrendered to the dictates of the fashion-industry? Has not the subject disappeared behind the objects it consumes? Has not the subject, perhaps, come to confront the task of shaping an identity for him/herself according to the patterns of a consumer behavior? Is not identity something provided by the market, something to be appropriated and discarded as any other good?

The temptation to give a positive answer to these questions is great. They try to summarize some cultural attitudes, which are strongly influenced by our acquired patterns of consumer behavior. What I would like to highlight in this regard is the connection between the universalisation of those consumption patterns and the so-called “death of the self” characteristic of post-modern attitudes, as well as the post-modern attitude towards identity<sup>2</sup>. Broadly speaking, this expression tries to capture the conclusion of the process we have been sketching so far: surpassed by an overwhelming drive for more sophisticated material goods, human beings have definitely lost sight of the ancient desire not only for a good, virtuous life, but also for the modern ideal of a valuable personality – whose adequate expression was to be found in the development of an individual style.

Aristotle did not think of money and wealth merely in negative tones. Far from it, he was quite aware that some virtues –like magnificence, can only be developed when one has a great amount of money (NE, IV, 2). Yet, in order to do so, one needs to remain focused on the good life. While desires for material goods may grow in refinement and sophistication, they should not become the only horizon of one’s life. Otherwise, they may blind us to achieving a deeper level of desire – not merely desire for life, but desire for a virtuous life. (Pol, I, 9, 1258 a). From this perspective, the reduction of one’s expectations to the expectations offered by consumer society means a reduction of the self to the shape it receives from the economic system.

Yet, as the human world is progressively more populated by the categories and ideals prevailing in the market, not only the Aristotelian *spoudaios* but also the Nietzschean and Weberian ideal of a valuable personality, seem bound to disappear. Unlike Aristotle, both Nietzsche and the market put at the center of their concerns some sort of individual. However, it is clear that the individual enthroned by the market has little to do with the individual enthroned by Nietzsche, since the latter required certain discipline, in order to develop an individual style, but this discipline has been eroded by market society.

In fact, we could venture that the Aristotelian social animal is in a better position to resist the seduction of the market than the isolated human being. Nevertheless,

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<sup>2</sup> Let me note, in passing, that the “death of the self” need not be regarded merely from a postmodern point of view, as the surrender of the subject to objective culture. As we know, Christianity has always spoken of “loosing one’s life” in order to acquire it. In this context, “loosing one’s life” is a way of referring to the basic Christian attitude of self-giving. It would be interesting to examine how this insight could help confront the relationship between the subject and the world of culture, in terms less tragic than Simmel’s tragedy of culture. At any rate, this Christian “death of the self” is not what some analysts of post-modern culture have in mind when they utter those words. Far from thinking of giving one’s self in order to recover it, they usually regard the death of the self as a conclusive step, resulting from the intrinsic dynamics of consumer society.

insofar as the market and the media tend to replace the traditional communities as points of reference for the constitution of one's identity, there is also an obvious trend toward approaching identity in a new, consumerist fashion.

As Baumann writes, "the quandary tormenting men and women at the turn of the Century is not so much how to obtain the identities of their choice and how to have them recognized by people around – but *which identity to choose* and how to keep alert and vigilant so that another choice can be made in case the previously chosen identity is withdrawn from the market or stripped of its seductive powers" (Bauman, 2001, p. 147). Were we to take this consideration literally, we would be led to think that people treat their identities as so many other consumer goods: which identities are offered on the market? Which are in fashion? In the context of a consumer society, fashion would embrace not just material items, but also identities.

## **5. The need for a micro-social approach to the relationship between fashion and identity**

Despite what this diagnosis suggests, I think its overall value is limited, since it largely remains at the macrosocial level. In order to get a more balanced account of the way people really deal with identity, and particularly the way they relate fashion and identity, it is necessary to come down to a microsocial level, and start paying attention to what Margaret Archer has called the "internal conversation" every human being develops, as he or she registers the emotional reactions derived from his or her interactions with nature and other human beings.

From a macro perspective, we can indeed account for the relevance that the otherwise strange relationship fashion-identity has acquired in our times. Thus, as pointed out earlier, identity was not a problem in the pre-modern world because in that world, one's position in life was determined by tradition. Identity only becomes a problem in the modern era, for it is only at this stage that people are confronted with the task of developing their own self, their own subjectivity. This has proved to be an increasingly demanding task, because the very process of modernization, which requires the development of a personal identity, also entails an extraordinary development and fragmentation of objective culture, which prevents any harmonization between the human subject and the world. From this perspective, modernity tends to generate alienated individuals, who neither recognise themselves in the world they have created nor understand themselves as intrinsically social beings. This experience of self-alienation has been intensified with the transition from a producer to a consumer capitalism. Overwhelmed by the allure of a consumer society, post-modern individuals are tempted to abandon any life-long project to think of their life in more immediate ways. This is why we have come to link identity and fashion.

Yet this macro diagnosis, useful as it is to clarify the structural laws defining the background of individual lives, needs to be balanced with a microsociological approach. For, while the contemporary individual is certainly a consumer, she is not merely that. She is not even merely an aesthetic or a meanings consumer. It is possible that she can no longer understand herself merely according to traditional identities, but she is not therefore completely free from either a bodily nature or a variety of social responsibilities. Whether she wants it or not, she is embedded in a web of social

relationships that constitute the necessary background of her choices and, hence, of her identity.

While some post-modern types may find in fashion “the” main way of expressing or concealing one’s personal identity, most people actually develop their identity around a number of ordinary commitments – family, profession, religion, etc. - whose articulation is never felt as just a matter of fashion, although it truly demands personal creativity<sup>3</sup>. Thus, although from a macro perspective an individualized society does tend to leave individuals more unprotected in the face of mass media and powerful corporations, this exposure would be negative – would lead to the definite surrender of subjectivity - only in those circumstances in which those reflective individuals were left alone with their own reflective individuality, and the media were to provide them with the only reference points for developing an identity. Yet this, again, is not a given, insofar we are truly bodily and social beings, and our social life also involves verbal and other kinds of communication with people around us.

## **6. A note on consumption of gendered fashion**

It is only by keeping in mind simultaneously both the macrosocial frame and the intersubjective web of relationships that make up real life that we can best address the question at issue in this conference: the consumption of gendered fashion. By this I mean the deliberate search for fashion that conveys one’s belonging or affiliation to a particular gender, as part of one’s identity.

In this regard it is first necessary to note, once again, the correspondence of this phenomenon with the modern individualization process. Indeed, while modernity has promoted individual differentiation, it has also promoted equality between the sexes. As it has sometimes been argued, this presumed equality often implies an equation between the human being and the human male. Simmel himself has called our attention to this fact. However, I do not intend here to dwell on this aspect of the problem. I am more concerned with the fact that, from a structural point of view, modernity has certainly implied the de-institutionalization of the social roles traditionally ascribed to each sex.

Thus, while traditional societies used to ascribe very fixed roles to men and women, modern societies have increasingly made all roles available to both sexes. To the extent that the traditional association of roles helped in the social definition of gender, such societies did not experience the distinction between sex and gender in such a dramatic fashion as modern individuals are likely to do. In many different ways, traditional societies helped the social reinforcement of the link between sex and gender. If you were born as a girl, this would be immediately recognized as a ground for developing certain skills instead of others. In addition, this often had a certain basis in common natural aptitudes: thus men are usually more suited for struggle, hence it was only logical to prefer them for these kinds of physically demanding tasks. However, in systematically privileging the common natural traits over the individual traits,

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<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, the “post-modern” attitude towards fashion – that is, placing too much weight upon it, regarding it as something more than play- looks more like a mark of either emptiness or crisis. Whether we look for identity in fashion or we look for fashion as a way of avoiding identity, both amount to seeing identity as something fashionable and this is a self-deceiving strategy. For whether we want it or not, throughout our lives we do develop a practical identity, whose consistency depends on the consistency of the goods to which we attach ourselves. This identity is not fashionable. And, conversely, any commitment to fashion can only result in *one*, very determinate, type of identity – that of the *fashion victim*, who, characteristically, in projecting the seriousness of commitment upon fashion, only manages to wipe out in the end one of its most alluring features: playfulness.

traditional societies *naturally* developed certain social expectations about gender – that is, certain traits socially regarded as masculine or feminine.

Now, those expectations about gender are precisely what have been partly eroded by the modern process of individualization. To the extent that you are mostly seen as an individual human being, whose social destiny does not seemingly depend on sexual difference in any relevant sense, traditional expectations about gender are also called into question. You are just an individual human being. The fact of being man or woman is perceived as socially unimportant – unless, of course, you, as an *individual* human being, alone or in association with others, freely decide to stress its relevance for some particular reason. In either case, the former link between sex and gender is under scrutiny, the object of careful deconstruction.

It seems to me that this theoretical framework allows us to understand the ambivalent role that the market has acquired in the definition or reinforcement of gender. The ambivalence has to do with the assumed ethical neutrality of the market. Indeed, there is an obvious, structural sense in which the market is really a neutral machine that simply processes perceived needs and produces goods to fill them. From this perspective, the market is always a powerful social indicator. Yet, at the same time, the market is not simply a machine, which just works of itself, because it is ultimately activated by economic agents. Economic agents are social agents, and ultimately ethical agents. From this perspective the market does not merely process needs and goods: it also incorporates values and attitudes towards life.

Accordingly, to the extent that the lack of differentiation resulting from the process of individualization is perceived as something disturbing in terms of identity, we could interpret the consumption of gendered fashion as a way of leaving behind the risk of lack of gender differentiation, once there is no other social institution in charge of it. Certainly, gender differentiation through clothes is nothing new at all. The real novelty is that, nowadays, at the macrosocial level the market seems to be *the only institution* in a position to exteriorize that difference.

There are many ways for the market to do this. One of them is to promote the consumption of gendered fashion inspired by more or less traditional ideas about gender. The resort to fashionable items is not the last word on this matter. After all, there are feminine ways of wearing masculine clothes and masculine ways of wearing feminine clothes – even if we cannot exactly determine what we actually mean by this. Another mechanism, which, following Alfredo Cruz, I would call “anatomic fashion”, consists involves wearing clothes designed to stress one’s sexual features as a way of making socially visible the difference between the sexes. From this perspective, contemporary stress on the body can certainly be interpreted in the light of contemporary crisis of identity. Now, it seems to me that such emphasis on the sexualized body, far from creating a genuine sense of gender belonging, simply restates the biological difference at the social level. A number of objections come to mind in this regard, most conspicuously the usual – but nonetheless real - objection that in this way women are truly reduced to sexual objects. Paradoxically enough, the group who has apparently succeeded in using the market and fashionable products to create a genuine sense of gender belonging are homosexuals – thereby confirming the above-mentioned result of the individualization process: the dissolution of the link between sex and gender.

Yet the market does not have the last word. As pointed out above, given the structural neutrality of the market, the last word on this and other matters is going to depend on the particular choices of the economic agents – both producers and consumers. On the side of consumers it is clear that these choices will largely depend on the kind of identity they have managed to develop at the microsocial level, and ultimately, on the nature and quality of ordinary relationships.