

Shop Girls, Social History and Social Theory

Garotas de loja, história social e teoria social

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RESUMO

Os trabalhadores de loja, na maioria mulheres, constituíram uma proporção significativa da força de trabalho da Grã-Bretanha desde a década de 1850, mas ainda sabemos relativamente pouco sobre sua história. Este artigo argumenta que houve uma negligência sistemática em relação a um dos maiores segmentos do emprego feminino por parte dos historiadores, e investiga por que isso aconteceu. Sugere que essa negligência esteja ligada a enfoques do trabalho que negligenciaram o setor de serviços como um todo, bem como a um contínuo mal-estar com as transformações da vida social da sociedade de consumo. Um elemento dessa transformação foi o surgimento de novas formas de trabalho estético, emocional e sexualizado. Certos tipos de “garotas de loja” as incorporaram de forma impressionante. Como resultado, tornaram-se ícones duradouros de consumo de massa, simultaneamente descartados como duplês culturais passivos ou punidos como poderosos agentes de destruição cultural. O artigo entrelaça a história social cotidiana das trabalhadoras de loja com representações inconstantes da “garota de loja”, das paródias do café-

ABSTRACT

Shop workers, most of them women, have made up a significant proportion of Britain's labour force since the 1850s but we still know relatively little about their history. This article argues that there has been a systematic neglect of one of the largest sectors of female employment by historians and investigates why this might be. It suggests that this neglect is connected to framings of work that have overlooked the service sector as a whole as well as to a continuing unease with the consumer society's transformation of social life. One element of that transformation was the rise of new forms of aesthetic, emotional and sexualised labour. Certain kinds of 'shop girls' embodied these in spectacular fashion. As a result, they became enduring icons of mass consumption, simultaneously dismissed as passive cultural dupes or punished as powerful agents of cultural destruction. This article interweaves the social history of everyday shop workers with shifting representations of the 'shop girl', from Victorian music hall parodies,

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-concerto vitoriano, mediante a teoria social modernista, ao bizarro ataque à bomba da boutique Biba em Londres pela Brigada Angry, no Dia do Trabalho, em 1971. Conclui que os historiadores progressistas têm muito a ganhar ao recuperar essas trabalhadoras e a economia de serviços que elas ajudaram a criar.

Palavras-chave: garotas de loja; cultura do consumo; modernidade.

through modernist social theory, to the bizarre bombing of the Biba boutique in London by the Angry Brigade on May Day 1971. It concludes that progressive historians have much to gain by reclaiming these workers and the service economy that they helped create.

Keywords: shopgirls; consumer culture; modernity.

HISTORICISING SHOPS AND SHOP WORKERS

In 1900, a quarter of a million British women worked in shops. By the mid-1960s, that number had risen to over a million, or nearly one fifth of the female workforce. Today, retail is one of the largest segments of private sector employment with 2.7 million workers – two thirds of them women. They serve customers who, between them, devote more hours each week to shopping than to any other single activity outside work.² Given their centrality to our daily lives, it is very surprising that historians have paid such little attention to shop workers. What might explain that neglect?

It is partly explained by the drawing of a false separation between the ‘two worlds’ of production and consumption. Shop work has struggled to be defined as ‘real work’ because it was, and continues to be, performed in spaces associated with consumption rather than production. Shops were somehow distinct from the workshops, sweatshops, mills, factories and farms where ‘real’ workers spent their working day. They were the places where the goods that many of these ‘real’ workers produced were ‘merely’ displayed and sold. This separation has been much critiqued by historians of consumer culture in general, and of retail in particular, who have long argued that the shop is the place where these ‘two worlds’ meet (Miller, 1998; Miller et al., 1998; Shaw, 2010).

Another reason for its neglect is that, from the mid-nineteenth century on, shop work began to be feminised. By the early twentieth century, its workers were predominantly young women who worked full time and left their jobs on marriage. After the second world war, a fast-growing number of married women took up, or returned to, part-time shop work, many as working mothers. With some important exceptions, most remained concentrated in the lower ranks of retail, most were paid a lot less than their male counterparts,

relatively few were unionised and many valued their flexibility.³ Until recently, they have been considered of little interest – to labour historians (who have focused on more clearly ‘productive’ or organised areas of the labour market), to economic historians (who have overlooked the service sector in general) to historians of consumer culture (who have focused on customers) or to feminist historians working across all these categories.

A third reason for their neglect, however, may lie in progressive academia’s ambiguous attitude to the rise of consumer society and its underpinning service sector. One of the defining features of a consumer society is that its social life comes to be primarily organised around consumption rather than production. To track the rise of the consumer society is to track the often uncomfortable story of how and why we have come to define ourselves less and less by where we work and more and more by what we buy. It is also, therefore, to track the rise of the marketization and commodification of social life. Given this, it can be difficult to find ways to write the history of the rise of the service sector and that of its workers who did so much to shape consumer cultures.

The quarter of a million women working in British retail in 1900 were part of what was then the world’s largest service sector – a sprawling and highly varied area of economic activity employing over a third of all British workers. It spanned many occupations. Retail, distribution, transport and building were among the largest, followed by domestic services, care services and financial services such as banking and insurance. By 1950, nearly half the working population worked in the service sector and today over three quarters do.⁴ While there are specific studies of the development of some its key components, including all of the occupations listed above,⁵ it is extremely surprising that there are no comprehensive histories of the service economy or the lives, values and aspirations of those who built it.

This article cannot rise to that huge challenge. It is inspired, however, by a desire to better understand the enduring and highly gendered hostility that one particular aspect of the service economy has generated: the aesthetic and emotional labour of ‘shop girls’. It draws on research conducted for a recent BBC TV series, *Shopgirls*, which tracked the changing profile, experiences and representations of this group from 1850 to the present.⁶

Work on consumer culture, shop keeping and shopping itself has flourished in recent decades.⁷ Some of this research has addressed the recruitment, training and experiences of shop workers within particular periods or particular retail specialisms. Winstanley, for example, offers a valuable account of the

nineteenth century expansion of the retail workforce. Hosgood gives a rare insight into the living and working conditions of mainly male sales assistants in the same period. Histories of individual entrepreneurs and specific stores frequently feature workers' lives but rarely offer a systematic analysis of these.⁸

Further valuable material is included within recent as well as older histories of women's work – a genre which, as a recent collection concludes, has long concentrated on factory work (Cowman; Jackson, 2005, esp. p. 10). Todd's illuminating study of early twentieth century young women workers shows that by 1951, 12 per cent of them were employed as shop assistants, most in firmly gender-segregated settings. Todd also seeks to expand traditional discussions of women's work cultures through the inclusion of selected shop assistants' narratives. A much earlier study by Holcombe on the Victorian labour market gives a rare insight into the entry of middle-class women into shop work. It is telling, however, that the small number of studies centering more directly on female shop workers have been produced by literary scholars and cultural theorists.⁹ Both Sanders' perceptive book on London shop girls in the Victorian and Edwardian era and Driscoll's piece on 'the life of the shop girl' take cultural representations as their starting point, although Sanders looks beyond this to detail the more everyday working lives of more ordinary women in retail (Sanders, 2006; Driscoll, 2010).

Outside academia, popular histories of shops and shop work have found a recent niche partly due to the success of TV period dramas, *Mr Selfridge* (ITV, 2013), and *The Paradise* (BBC One, 2012).¹⁰ My own co-authored book, written to accompany the BBC TV *Shopgirls* series, sets out to bridge the gap between these academic and popular approaches (Cox; Hopley, 2014). It offers a long view of the changing nature of shop work from the 1850s to the present and opens up new research questions – some of which are taken up by this article. Why were certain kinds of women shop workers, those typified as 'shop girls', held up as troubling icons of commodity capitalism? How far might this be explained in terms of a recurring backlash against the new forms of aesthetic, emotional and sexualised labour that they embodied? What might progressive historians gain by reclaiming these workers and the service economy that they helped to create?

THE RISE OF THE 'SHOP GIRL'

The term 'shop girl' began to be used in Britain and north America in the early nineteenth century. It was a new term to describe a new kind of worker.

Other more formal descriptors were in use: for example, mid-century newspapers carried advertisements for ‘respectable female shop assistants’ or ‘sales-women’ (Cox; Hobley, 2014, pp. 3-4). However, ‘shop girl’ stuck in the popular and literary imagination. It grew up alongside another new term: ‘working girl’. This emerged in New York slang to describe the thousands of young working class women entering the waged labour market at that time – and arguably for the *first time* in such numbers in world history (Allen, 1995). However, ‘working girl’ had a double-edge from the start, with its connotations around the selling, bartering or promise of sexual services. These connotations would stay with certain kinds of shop workers for decades.

Women had, of course, worked in markets and shops long before this. However, the dramatic expansion of the retail trades from the early and mid-nineteenth century led to, and was largely predicated upon, a similar dramatic expansion of this labour force. Most were engaged in the work from their early teens to their late twenties, the period between leaving school (if they had attended formal school at all) and marriage. The majority were working class and had often opted for shop work over domestic service, factory work, the sweated trades or agricultural labour. A minority were young women from lower middle class homes who either wanted, or simply needed, to work to support themselves or their families. For both groups, shop work provided an answer to the so-called ‘Woman Question’ revealed by the 1851 English census and highlighted by first-wave feminists: that women simply outnumbered men in the population which meant that they could not depend upon future husbands for their financial support. Political economist Harriet Martineau calculated that ‘more than two million [women] are independent in their industry, [and] self-supporting, like men.’ (Martineau, 1859, p. 330). Her research was one of the catalysts for the setting up of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women by the Langham Place Group in 1859. The Society seized on shop work as a desirable, respectable and light form of work eminently suitable for young women. As one of their pamphlets put it, ‘Why should bearded men be employed to sell ribbon, lace, gloves, neckerchiefs, and the other dozen other trifles to be found in a silkmercer’s or haberdasher’s shop?’ (Association for Promoting..., 1859).

Shopkeepers keen to expand their businesses in the mid-nineteenth century British economic boom were prone to agree – partly because they could pay girls and women much less than boys and men and partly because many were eager to attract more women customers. The majority of first generation female shop workers were employed in small but expanding family businesses

as assistants to drapers, confectioners, co-ops – and later grocers – serving a largely working class customer base whose slowly rising wages underpinned the rising demand for services of all kinds. A more high profile minority, however, worked in more high profile stores specializing in millinery, haberdashery, confectionary, fancy and luxury goods or in the vast department stores which began to appear in large towns and cities across Europe and America from the 1860s and 70s on. It was this minority, typically dressed in smart black silk (or a cheaper substitute) with white lace collar and cuffs, that came to embody the ‘shop girl’ brand.

SHOP GIRLS, STYLE AND SERVICE: AESTHETIC LABOUR AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR

If we accept Pettinger’s insightful view that ‘service work makes a consumer culture possible’, then we need to understand how shop workers spent their working day (Pettinger, 2011, p. 223). This is challenging question to answer because their employers – the mainly small family businesses that were the bedrock of the Victorian private sector – left relatively few records. Those that survive are scattered in personal, private and business archives. State regulation and inspection of the retail trades was minimal, even in the early twentieth century, which means that statutory archives contain relatively little material on day-to-day life behind the counter. Late Victorian parliamentary enquiries and campaigns to reduce working hours and improve conditions yield some useful insights but their records must be read with caution because they were often led by those who wanted to regulate women out of waged labour altogether. However, they do offer an inside view of working and living conditions.¹¹ From the 1890s on, new trade unions set up by shop assistants began to document the everyday lives of their workers and some newspapers ran whistleblowing stories on unscrupulous store owners.¹² Autobiographies written by one-time shop workers and, more commonly, shopkeepers, provide further valuable detail although most tend to be written by men (Ablett, 1876; Copeman, 1946; Hoffman, 1949; Bondfield, 1948).

The view that emerges from these sources is that day-to-day shop work was very varied. It could involve everything from selecting, ordering, buying, unloading and arranging stock, to advising customers, wrapping or altering their purchases, sending out accounts and cashing up, or even cleaning the store and doing domestic chores in staff dormitories and lodgings. In small stores,

assistants might be involved in many of these tasks. In larger stores with more complex divisions of labour, they were more likely to have a specialist role. Department stores like Bainbridge's in Newcastle; Kendal, Milne and Faulkner in Manchester; and Harrods or Whiteley's in London each had over 1,000 staff by the turn of the nineteenth century organised into strict hierarchies. Staff across the sector, however, typically worked very long hours. Prior to, and even after, parliamentary attempts to regulate trading hours in the 1880s, many worked up to 17 hours per day, spending most of those hours on their feet relieved by short meal breaks. The thousands that 'lived in' – in accommodation usually owned by their employer – were expected to be available around the clock for additional duties as required. Their bed and board was deducted from their wages, along with the costs of their working clothes and any fines incurred for, for example, damaging stock, wasting food or failing to close a sale. 'Standing and smiling' might look easy but shop work was demanding.

The 'standing and smiling' was an artifice. It was a performance enacted for the benefit of customers to enhance their shopping experience and encourage them to spend more. It signalled a style of customer service that was new to retail and which developed alongside the formalisation of mid-Victorian domestic service. Just as servants should be ready to meet any personal need at any time, so shop workers should stand – quite literally – ready to meet their customers' demands. These new standards of customer service were predicated upon new forms of gendered labour: emotional labour and aesthetic labour. These two connected concepts have been very profitably used by sociologists to analyse work styles in the contemporary service and care industries but they have yet to be widely adopted by historians of work.

Emotional labour, as defined by Hochschild in her pioneering study of flight attendants, refers to techniques of emotion management on the part of workers as an integral part of a particular labour process. It is undertaken whenever a job 'requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). In the case of nineteenth century high-end shop work, particular forms of emotional expression were encouraged by employers – a delicate combination of servility and authority, an ability to offer sympathy and advice, flattery and honest opinion. For Hochschild, the development of organisationally-directed emotional labour signalled the rise of the 'commercialisation of human feeling' and, with it, the emergence of the 'managed heart'. It is also closely connected to the rise of new forms of 'aesthetic labour' which refers to the management of workers' physical looks, style, personal presentation and

appearance and the requirement that they embody certain attitudes and capacities. Pettinger's study of contemporary female sales assistants usefully defines aesthetic labour as 'an investment of skill, knowledge, time, money and energy into performing femininity' and explores the huge part this plays in fashion retail today. Some (but not all) of that investment clearly seeks to sexualise workers and workplaces, as noted by Cockburn, Adkins and others (Pettinger, 2005; Cockburn, 1991, pp. 149-150; Adkins, 1992; 2002).

Most analyses of emotional, aesthetic and sexualised labour focus on late twentieth century economic shifts and the increasing prominence of the service sector. However, both concepts are clearly open to broader historical deployment. The history of retail offers a rich starting point. Indeed, many existing historical studies have analysed the sensual, spectacular worlds of the department store – albeit most frequently from the perspective of the consumer and their desires, rather than that of the store workers and the active part they played in shaping those desires (Rappaport, 2001; Walkowitz, 1992). An important exception here is Rendall's discussion of the early days of the elite Burlington Arcade, arguably Britain's first covered shopping mall. When it was opened off Piccadilly in the 1820s, its owners openly advertised for 'professional beauties' to serve in its luxury outlets (Rendall, 1996). Similarly, Sanders' study of late nineteenth century London shop girls shows how young women were recruited for their looks and demeanour and 'trained' how to judge customers' moods and needs within seconds (Sanders, 2006). By the early twentieth century, such training had become professionalised and routinised within many larger stores, as outlined in specific store histories of, for example, Selfridge's, Marks and Spencer and John Lewis (Woodhead, 2007; Worth, 2007; Cox, 2010). While none of these histories use the language of aesthetic and emotional labour, they are clearly working with comparable concepts.

As already outlined, by no means all female shop workers were formally called upon to use these specific skills. In addition, these skills were also commonly employed by some male sales assistants (notably those working in menswear and department stores) as highlighted by Mort and Nixon (Mort, 1999; Nixon, 1996). I want to suggest here, however, that the undertaking of aesthetic and emotional labour by certain types of young women shop workers was one of the primary reasons why they became *particular* objects of deeply ambiguous public attention. The appearance and demeanour of these early 'shop girls' marked them out from other women workers and from male shop workers. It drew continuous critical, and generally salacious, observation from

Victorian and Edwardian – as well as later generations – of commentators, artists, journalists and social theorists.

An 1842 cartoon in the *Illustrated London News* shows two top-hatted gentlemen, with no-one to ‘chastise their audacity’, watching two young milliners. Captioned ‘ogling the shop girls’, the scene and its dynamic – an external gaze turned upon attractive young women working behind a glass window – became an enduring cultural representation. It was frequently recaptured in French impressionism. Tissot’s painting, *The Young Lady of the Shop*, completed as part of his ‘Women of Paris’ series between 1883 and 1885, presents the image of a young haberdasher as viewed by a male customer. With its air of ‘casually glimpsed modern life’, it echoed themes depicted by Degas, Manet and Renoir – all of whom were drawn to the ‘eroticized commerce’ of shop life.¹³ Tissot’s image was exhibited in London in 1886 with an intriguing catalogue entry:

our young lady with her engaging smile is holding open the door til her customer takes the pile of purchases from her hand and passes to the carriage. She knows her business and had learned that the first lesson of all, that her duty is to be polite, winning and pleasant. Whether she means what she says, or much of what her looks express, is not the question: enough if she has a smile and appropriate answer for everybody.¹⁴

Fascination with the girl behind the glass continued into the mid-twentieth century, long after the figure of the young working woman had become a very familiar one in the economic landscape. Fashion boutiques in the 1960s looked to break different social boundaries in different ways – as will be discussed below – yet they, too, engineered a new take on this old image. A particularly striking one is a photograph by John Downing of a young woman modelling lingerie in the window of the Henry Moss boutique on Carnaby Street in 1966.¹⁵ From the Burlington Arcade in the 1820s to the boutiques of the 1960s, the ‘shop girl’ sexualised commodity culture and was a prominent player in what Nava has termed ‘visceral cosmopolitanism’ (Nava, 2007).

Sexual desire – often frustrated – dominates much commentary on the ‘shop girl’. Diarist and civil servant Arthur Munby, who sought out the company of many working women in his predatory walks around mid-Victorian London, was beguiled by shop workers with their ‘fair faces and tall good figures’. He gives a full account of his summer evening conversation in Hyde Park in 1861 with one young woman, Eliza Close. He found her black silk gown

and green and white bonnet ‘tasteful...but beyond her class’. She was ‘a counter-jumper’ seeking to disguise her origins as a farmer’s daughter. Her ‘habits of speech [came] midway between the dignified reserve and fastidiousness of a lady and the honest bluntness and crude vulgarity of a servant’.¹⁶ Journalist Henry Mayhew conducted similar interviews with ‘shop girls’ as part his project to catalogue *London Labour and the London Poor*, intimating that many also worked in the high class sex trade, notably those employed in the Burlington Arcade.¹⁷ Erotic writer ‘Walter’ documented – or at least fantasised about – his own sexual encounters with shop girls in his 1880s text, *My Secret Life*.¹⁸ *Punch* cartoonist Linley Sambourne took surreptitious photographs of ‘fashionably dressed shop girls’ as they walked to and from work.¹⁹

By the turn of the century, stories about these idealised women frequently appeared in popular magazines: features in *Forget-Me-Not* magazine were typical: ‘The Adventures of a Shop Girl’, ‘That Pretty Shop Girl’, ‘A Little White Slave’, ‘The Shopgirl’s Chance of Marriage’, and ‘How Shop Girls Win Rich Husbands’.²⁰ Theatres and music halls regularly dramatized such stories for the stage, often with costumes provided by department stores themselves. The musical comedy *The Shop Girl* (1895) became one of the Gaiety Theatre’s most successful shows, running for several years in the West End before transferring to Broadway. It told the story of Bessie Brent, an innocent sales assistant whose morals are put the test by the various temptations of shop life. In *The Girl from Kay’s* (1902) a shop girl chorus sang of being ‘goody, goody little girls’ who nonetheless were going to be ‘naughty, til we’re getting on for forty’.²¹ As Sanders argues, the characters in all these stories walk a tightrope between moral elevation into marriage or moral fall into prostitution. The stories themselves follow a romance narrative driven by the deferred fulfilment of desire and the elusive quest for satisfaction in the new consumer culture (Sanders, 2006, p. 5).

These cultural outpourings signal the extent to which – and the speed with which – the ‘shop girl’ became a powerful symbol of commodity capitalism. She was a new kind of worker: she did not make the huge range of goods on display in the shops but she could use persuasion, guile and flirtation to make customers throw off thrift and buy them. She embodied a new kind of stigma-laden social class: a working class ‘counter-jumper’, weeding her way into a new lower middle class or petit bourgeoisie. Simultaneously, she was also a new kind of mass market consumer: she used her own modest wages to buy whatever she could for herself – and when her own meagre means ran out, she was, according to the stereotype, more than willing to flirt with any man willing to treat her. He, in turn, could expect to be repaid in sexual favours or

marriage. Who really knew what the demure assistant in the black silk dress was really selling? Who could ever trust or respect her?

Many feminist social scientists have traced expressions of cultural hostility towards young working class women, a hostility often inseparable from their sexuality.²² Their studies focus on the late twentieth century and tend to focus on young women as consumers rather than workers. One of my arguments here is that this hostility surfaced much earlier and was often directed to young women workers. The 'shop girl' was a frequent target. As Driscoll observes, she sat at the 'intersection of art and the everyday' from the late nineteenth century on.²³ Cast as the central character in countless stories about 'personal transformation' and 'escape' from the banality of everyday life, the ordinary working girl's quest for the extraordinary was 'the staple of musicals, comedies, drama and suspense' as well as an icon of visual culture from the newspaper cartoon to the art gallery (Driscoll, 2010, p. 105). She combined elements of the specific types of gendered subjectivities 'so frequently drawn upon by classic theorists of modernity to capture the new social relations and fault lines of the new urbanism' (ibid.). To paraphrase Felski, she was 'part voracious consumer, part feminized aesthete, part prostitute' (ibid., citing Felski, 1995).

LITTLE SHOPGIRLS AND THE CULT OF DISTRACTION

The 'shop girl' remained central to modernist commentary on consumer culture into the twentieth century. As Huyssen observes, 'the inscription of the feminine on the notion of mass culture' which had begun in the nineteenth century, 'did not relinquish its hold' (Huyssen, 1986). Instead, it arguably took on a darker edge, whether penned by those who embraced the rise of consumer culture or those who did not.

In 1912, author and journalist Gilbert Keith (GK) Chesterton picked a public fight with Selfridge's in his regular *Daily News* column. As a socially conservative patriot, he railed against the scale of the new Oxford Street store which had opened in 1909 and the emotionally manipulative business methods of its 'brash' American proprietor. These 'awful interminable emporia' not only threatened the livelihoods of what he regarded as traditional shopkeepers but also traditional cultural values. Significantly, Chesterton singled out Selfridge's female staff for particular attack, complaining that they were 'poorly trained' and indistinguishable from the store's countless headless mannequins. In his own rather disturbing words, 'When you look at the dress-model you think that some shop-girl has had her head cut off; when you look back at the

real shop-girl you feel inclined to do the same to her.²⁴ This decapitation fantasy had surfaced in earlier representations of ‘shopgirl-as-mannequin’, notably in the opening chapters of Emile Zola’s 1883 novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (The Ladies’ Paradise) which portrays one of Paris’ first department stores as a machine manufacturing relentless but unrealisable desire.²⁵

Zola’s writing, along with Impressionist art, inspired powerful new thinking about the transformation of everyday urban life through mass culture. That transformation lay at the heart of what Charles Baudelaire had been arguably the first to define as ‘modernity’ – a way of living shaped by fleeting and sensual experience. Baudelaire’s influence would be greatly extended by Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, a collage of writings on the sights, sounds, streets and shops of nineteenth century Paris.

The legacy of the *Arcades Project* ripples through twentieth century social theory and perceptions of the rising service economy. This is powerfully evidenced in the work of Siegfried Kraucauer, editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and one of Benjamin’s collaborators. Kraucauer was a prolific observer of everyday urban life in the Weimar Republic. Like Baudelaire and Benjamin, he celebrated the new social relations created by consumer culture but could be highly critical of the service workers who underpinned it. His 1927 essay, ‘The Little Shopgirls Go to the Cinema’, is a sharp case in point. In his view, shop girls were high profile representatives of a new rationalized, salaried workforce that challenged the old social codes protecting the professional skills and associations of traditional German workers. The new workforce was deskilled, divided, hierarchized and driven by a self-centred quest for material goods and competitive advantage. Along with office girls, typists and clerks, their tastes supported the rise of what he famously termed the Cult of Distraction – the cinema, the dance hall and cheap fiction of the new mass culture industry.²⁶

Kracauer was excited by the social potential of film as a means of expressing repressed desires but, as Moore argues, found ‘none of that potential in the women who form[ed] a large part of the audience’, an audience that ‘fail[ed] to grasp the complexity’ of the format’ (Moore, 2001, p. 43). For Benner, this reflects ‘a prejudice as old as the analysis of mass culture itself – that its consumption is a passive activity, rendering one weak, feminine, and “small”’ (Benner, 2012, pp. 161-162). However, Kracauer simultaneously saw these ‘Little Shop girls’ as larger than life sexual predators. In another essay he describes the ‘salaried-bohemian [girls] who come to the big city in search of adventure’ as ‘roam[ing] like comets through the world of salaried employees’,

concluding that ‘even the best astronomer cannot determine whether they will end up in the street or in the marriage bed.’²⁷

This dualism would continue to characterise later conceptualisations of mass commodity culture. The work of Benjamin and Kracauer found new expression in the critical theory of Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School and its drive to expose the cultural structures (overlooked by Marx, in their view) that they believed legitimated mature capitalism. Critical theory’s imagining of gendered class relations, and the forms of popular culture these supported, has been much discussed by feminist scholars.²⁸ As Modleski put it thirty years ago, ‘the need for a feminist critique becomes obvious at every level of the debate’ because ‘our ways of thinking and feeling about mass culture are so intricately bound up with notions of the feminine.’²⁹ My argument here is that the workers within the service industries supporting mass culture need to be a more consistent part of that important and still much-needed critique. For Adorno, it was – once again – the ‘shop girl’ who stood as everyday culture’s ‘everywoman’. In a 1941 essay, he writes of, ‘...the poor shop girl who derives gratification by identification with [film star] Ginger Rogers, who with her beautiful legs and unsullied character, marries the boss.’

This apparent gratification takes a particular form that demands further discussion. In Adorno’s view, the shop girl’s pleasure in watching Ginger Rogers came not from the fact that she believes that she, too, could find happiness but, on the contrary, from the realisation that she had ‘no part in happiness’:

Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley may be dream factories. But they do not merely supply categorical wish fulfillment for the girl behind the counter. She does not immediately identify herself with Ginger Rogers marrying. What does occur may be expressed as follows: when the audience at a sentimental film or sentimental music become aware of the overwhelming possibility of happiness, they dare to confess to themselves what the whole order of contemporary life ordinarily forbids them to admit, namely, that they actually have no part in happiness.’ (Adorno, 1941)

Adorno goes on to make a specific claim about the kind of deceptive liberation that a shop girl, and others like her, could expect:

What is supposed to be wish fulfillment is only the *scant liberation* that occurs with the realization that at last one need not deny oneself the happiness of knowing that one is unhappy and that one could be happy. The experience of the shop

girl is related to that of the old woman who weeps at the wedding services of others, blissfully becoming aware of the wretchedness of her own life. (Adorno, 1941, my emphasis)

The shop girl's sense of 'scant liberation' is created by her recognition of her own wretchedness and the resulting 'temporary release given to the awareness that one has missed fulfilment' (Adorno, 1941). In other words, she is both alienated and alienating: both victim and agent of the wider social dislocation engendered by mass consumer culture.

LITTLE SISTER, THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE AND THE BIBA BOMBING

The work of Adorno and the Frankfurt School is a turning point here. On the one hand, it represents the culmination of a century of earlier critical commentary on the rise of commodity capitalism. On the other, it triggered new and even stronger critiques of how this now mature capitalism was exerting ever more subtle forms of exploitation and alienation. Once again, however, the figure of the aesthetic service worker looms large in the writings of radical social theorists who wanted to push this thinking to new limits.

Guy Debord and his adherents were among the most prominent of these post-war thinkers. Debord's most well-known book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, was one of the inspirations for the Paris protests of 1968. His argument was simple: people's relationships with each other in modern society had become badly distorted by consumer culture. They were being mesmerized by the pursuit of money and the things they could buy to the point where social life was no longer about 'living' but only about 'having', not about 'doing' but 'watching'. For Debord, all this was a dangerous illusion, 'a spectacle' generated by mass commodity culture – through its shops, magazines, adverts and films – promising idealized lifestyles that could never be truly attained and which were, in case, empty (Debord, 1995). Like Adorno, he saw the resulting alienation not simply as 'some vague dissatisfaction' with modern life but rather as 'an antagonism between humanity and forces that humanity has itself created' (Jappe; Nicholson-Smith, 1999, p. 102). This antagonism had resulted in a 'transformation of the economy from a means into an end' via a process that '[eludes] any kind of conscious control' and which stifled individual independence and creativity (ibid., p. 102).

Wark argues that Debord and his followers identified two kinds of spectacle in post-war society: ‘the concentrated and the diffuse’ (Wark, 2011, p. 1116). The ‘concentrated spectacle’ was found in fascist, Stalinist or Maoist states and cohered around an Orwellian Big Brother-style ‘cult of personality’. At the time that Debord was writing, such political personality cults were still strong in many states in eastern and southern Europe and many parts of Asia. By contrast, the ‘diffuse spectacle’ was on the rise in the capitalist, democratic West, embedded in their consumer economies and cultural industries – and, I would argue, in the aesthetic labour that underpinned both. The diffuse spectacle cohered around Little Sister, rather than Big Brother. Paraphrasing Raoul Vaneigem, one of Debord’s collaborators, Wark writes the ‘whole spectacular social order rested on the struggle for which she was a body double’:

Little Sister is watching you. She stares out at you from billboards, magazines, screens large and small. Behind the production of her image is not some quirky dictator and his nervous minions, but a small army of stylist, hairdressers, photographers and, of course, models. (Wark, 2013, p. xxx, note 11)

How could the spectacle and the subtle power of Little Sister be challenged? For Debord and Vaneigem, only through a new kind of intervention: situationism. Since the passive act of consuming made people passive spectators of their own lives, the only way to confront the power of both spectacle and commodity was to disrupt it by creating ‘situations’ that revealed their true nature. Situationism as an anarchic form of direct action sought the re-invention of everyday life through everyday acts of disruption or *détournement* that would jolt people out of their customary ways of thinking and open their eyes to the limits of ‘scant liberation’. Its simple message certainly inspired the liberation struggles that started on the streets of Paris in 1968. However, it also perpetuated deeply disparaging views of real life ‘Little Sisters’. One situationist-inspired intervention stands out in this context.

On May Day 1971, the Angry Brigade – a small group of young British anarchist activists – planted a bomb in the basement of Biba – one of London’s best known shops. Histories of the group are conflicting but broadly agree that its members were variously inspired by Debord, the events of 1968, the US civil rights movements, women’s liberation campaigns and extreme anti-fascist groups, notably the Baader-Meinhof in Germany and the First of May Group opposing Franco’s regime in Spain.³⁰ Over the previous months, they had

planted other devices in the offices and homes of civil servants, politicians, judges and other, in their words, 'high pigs'.³¹ Their attack on Biba was unusual. The group set out their rationale for it in a communiqué issued shortly afterwards. It singled out Biba's shop assistants and everything they believed them to represent:

All the sales girls in the flash boutiques are made to dress the same and have the same make-up... In fashion as in everything else, capitalism can only go backwards – they've nowhere to go – they're dead. Life is so boring there is nothing to do except spend all our wages on the latest skirt or shirt.

It continued:

Brothers and Sisters, what are your real desires? Sit in the drugstore, look distant, empty, bored, drinking some tasteless coffee? Or perhaps BLOW IT UP or BURN IT DOWN. The only thing you can do with these modern slave-houses – called boutiques – is WRECK THEM.³²

The bomb caused extensive damage but no serious injuries: the Angry Brigade had given a telephone warning giving those inside time to evacuate. The incident seemed anomalous. The group never again targeted a commercial property or ordinary members of the public. The incident is rarely referred to in their own further writings or those of others who have researched them.³³ Yet, the attack – and in particular their justification for it – looks much less anomalous when viewed against the long history, as set out in this article – of periodic but sustained rhetorical attacks on the symbolic power of the 'shop girl'.

Why do these rhetorical attacks matter? I would argue that they matter because they demonstrate an enduring hostility to young women workers in the service economy that simultaneously dismisses them as passive cultural dupes or punishes as powerful agents of cultural destruction: the Little Shopgirls eliding with Little Sister. Further, I would argue that that this hostility can be read, in part, as a backlash against evolving forms of highly gendered aesthetic and emotional labour. In my view, this also helps to explain why the lives of shop workers have been broadly neglected by historians who may not share this hostility but who have, nevertheless, struggled to find ways of delineating and valuing their labour.

RECLAIMING THE 'SHOP GIRL'

The final section of this article suggests how we might begin to reclaim the history of shop work. I have already proposed that one way of doing this is through tracing longer histories of aesthetic and emotional labour. I would like to end by suggesting three further lines of enquiry: first, linking certain kinds of shop work to (counter)cultural innovation; second, by connecting aspects of shop work to the rise of 'the creative class'; and third, by locating the history of shop work within a wider history of the service economy.

Biba offers us one of many possible places to start. As a commercial enterprise that broke class barriers, pushed sexual boundaries and celebrated an edgy creativity, it helped to forge counter-cultures of its own – albeit not of the kind likely to be acknowledged by the Angry Brigade or their intellectual antecedents.

Biba was created as a small boutique in a Kensington back street in 1964 by Barbara Hulanicki, a Polish migrant and art school graduate, and her husband, Stephen Fitz-Simon, an advertising executive. Latterly described as 'a theme park devoted to elegantly wasted decadence', it was an 'escapist paradise'.³⁴ By 1971, it had moved to larger premises stretching over several floors. Customers would wander among ostrich feathers, mottled mirrors and potted palms to try out suede thigh boots, floppy hats and hot pants. In doing so, they were re-fashioning more than just themselves. They were served by sales assistants recruited because they looked the part, could model the clothes or put browsers at ease, whether they were debutantes from Chelsea or day-trippers from Essex. 'A Biba girl' had a distinctive aesthetic, described by Hulanicki as 'square shouldered and quite flat-chested' with an 'oval face' and eyelids 'heavy with long spiky lashes' (Turner, 2007, p. 11). They might 'look sweet' but they were 'hard as nails.' They 'did what [they] felt like at that moment.' Biba girls did not 'live in', as generations of female staff in department and other stores had done. Instead they rented and shared flats and bedsits and, according to Hulanicki again, 'had no mother waiting for them to see if they came home with a crumpled dress' (Hulanicki, 1983, p. 78). Whatever kind of liberation this was, it was more than 'scant liberation'.

The heady world of boutiques, like Biba, seemed to be a contained one. However, its economic, social and cultural influence was far-reaching, as many have observed (Fogg, 2003; Gilbert, 2006). Rappaport's well known argument that women consumers 'made' the fin-de-siecle West End might be extended: London boutiques of the 1950s and 60s, many of them set up and staffed by

young women, ‘made’ much of post-war youth culture. Boutique fashion was quickly transmitted beyond London and other large cities via girls’ magazines, mail order and rapid high street emulation. To give just one example, the ‘Chelsea look’ (akin to the ‘Biba look’ described above) had been developed on the Kings Road by Mary Quant and others but was quickly sold to a hungry mass market through a new high street chain, Chelsea Girl, opened in 1965 (Cox; Hobley, 2014, pp. 213-214). One way of reclaiming the history of shop work, then, is to link it more substantially to the broader history of post-war youth consumer culture and the (counter)cultural innovation that this, in turn, helped to inspire.

Viewed from this perspective, certain kinds of shop work could arguably be defined as a ‘creative occupation’ – driven by ‘a creative ethos’, and, moreover, often dependent upon aesthetic and emotional labour. If we follow Florida’s recent and much-debated argument, this means that post-war ‘shop girls’ – whether working in Biba or in a Chelsea Girl chain store – could be seen as part of Britain’s ‘creative class’ and, as such, as economically indispensable (Florida, 2002). Another way of reclaiming the history of shop work, then, may be to locate it within a broader history of the rise of the ‘creative class’. Such a history would need to challenge a central plank of Florida’s characterisation of the ‘creative class’ as ‘those employed in creative occupations whose market value rose rapidly from the late twentieth century on’ (Glaeser, 2005). This is because – despite their important economic and cultural contributions – the market value of shop workers fell quite dramatically over the course of the twentieth century. An earnings survey conducted by the Department of Employment in 1968 showed that the job of sales assistant was ‘one of the lowest paid in Britain’. This was the case for both men and women workers, with one study calculating that ‘only gardeners, farmworkers and general catering workers, waiters and barmen earned less than salesmen, and only kitchenhands, hairdressers and barmaids earned less than saleswomen’ (Robinson; Wallace, 1974, p. 39).

The pay, conditions, status, hopes and dreams of service sector workers like these still await their historian. Writing their history – and that of the wider service economy – is no easy task. Some have warned against attempting it: Glynn and Booth, for example, argue that the ‘major differences between its components’ mean that ‘[g]eneralisations about the service sector tend to be meaningless’. They do not dispute, however, the sector’s ‘aggregate importance’, stressing that it involved ‘two thirds of fixed assets’ and employed ‘more than half the [British] workforce’ by the mid-twentieth century (Glynn; Booth,

1996, p. 81). This astounding fact alone means that historians – and social scientists – simply need to be more creative themselves in devising ways to capture the story of the rise of the service economy. A more expansive history of shop workers, their aspirations and networks would make a significant contribution to that effort and would also address a yawning gap in women's history. Writing such a history, however, may mean facing up to our own collective and enduring unease with the figure of the 'Little Shopgirl' – and with the consumer society she helped to create.

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NOTES

¹ Prof Pamela Cox, PhD, University of Cambridge, 1997. The primary research was supported by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council.

² COX; HOBLEY, 2014, p. 1 and p. 216; UK Commission..., 2014. See Table 4.2 Females – Occupational Categories.

³ COX; HOBLEY, 2014, pp. 1-30, p. 216. On part-time retail work, see: ROBINSON; WALLACE, 1974. On patterns of female unionization in retail, see USDAW, n.d.

⁴ BATTILANI, 2010. 'Table 1 – Employment in the Service Sector as a percentage of total employment, years 1900, 1950, 1971, 1998, 2007' shows that the proportion of the British workforce employed in the service sector was 39% in 1900, 47% in 1950 and 77% in 2007. The table is sourced from FEINSTEIN, 1999 and OECD, 2008. Feinstein's summary of shifts in civilian employment shows that (p. 53) in 1900, 1.6 million (10% of total British civilian workforce of 16.7 million) worked in agriculture, 8.5 million (51%) in industry and 6.5 million (39%) in services. By 1950, 1.2 million (5% of a total civilian workforce of 22.2 million) worked in agriculture, 10.9 million (49%) in industry and 10 million (46%) in services.

⁵ See for example COLLINS; BAKER, 2003; SAVAGE; BARKER, 2012; ANDERSON, 1988; FINE, 1995. Notably, there are no references to the 'service economy' and just one to the 'service sector' across the 695 pages of TRENTMANN, 2012. For a rare study of the gendering of service sectors, see KWOLEK-FOLLAND; WALSH, 2007.

⁶ *Shopgirls: The True Story of Life Behind the Counter*, three part series produced by betty for BBC TWO, 2014. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/proginfo/2014/25/shopgirls>.

⁷ See for example, TRENTMANN, 2000; HILTON; DAUNTON, 2001; HILTON, 2003; CROSSICK; HAUPT, 1984; MILLER et al., 1998; LANCASTER, 1995; GURNEY, 1996. See also papers and publications by members of the Centre for the History of Retailing and Distribution (CHORD).

⁸ WINSTANLEY, 1983; HOSGOOD, 1989; 1999. For examples of individual store and entrepreneur histories, see: HONEYCOMBE, 1984; DALE, 1995; STRATMANN, 2004; FOSTER, 1973; DAVIES, 1983. For longer list, see COX; HOBLEY, 2014, bibliography.

⁹ TODD, 2005, p. 25, pp. 47-49. Todd's memoirs include, for example, THEW, 1985.

¹⁰ See for example, SEYMOUR, 2014.

¹¹ COX; HOBLEY, 2014, pp. 42-50, on testimony and other evidence gathered by campaigners and Parliamentary committees prior to the passing of the 1886 Shop Hours Regulation Act which limited the working hours of children and apprentices to 74 hours per week.

¹² COX; HOBLEY, 2014, pp. 93-102, on the establishment of the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks in 1898 and on whistleblowing articles published by its journal, *The Shop Assistant*, and the *Daily Chronicle* in the 1890s.

¹³ *Illustrated London News*, 1842, cartoon 'Ogling the Shop Girls' (I am grateful to Rohan McWilliam for sharing this with me). CLAYSON, 2003, pp. 124-126.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124. The exhibition took place at the Arthur Tooth gallery.

¹⁵ Getty Images, 160650607. A model taking part in a risqué photoshoot in the window of a new Henry Moss boutique in Carnaby Street, London, 11 May 1966. Credit: John Downing.

¹⁶ HUDSON, 1972, entries for 2 June 1861 and 22 Feb 1862.

¹⁷ MAYHEW, 1862, chapter on 'Seclusives, Or Those That Live in Private Houses and Apartments'.

¹⁸ On Walter's *My Secret Life*, see KEARNEY, 1982, p. 127. I am grateful to Guy Woolnough for this reference.

¹⁹ See one of his photographs in COX; HOBLEY, 2014, p. 62. 'Fashionably dressed shopgirl'. Reproduced courtesy of 18 Stafford Terrace, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea [Sambourne family home, now a museum].

²⁰ COX; HOBLEY, 2014, pp. 82-83. See also SANDERS, 2006.

²¹ COX; HOBLEY, 2014, pp. 64-65, p. 89. See also SANDERS, 2006.

²² See, in particular, SKEGGS, 1997; McROBBIE, 1991; LEES, 1993.

²³ DRISCOLL, 2010, p. 105. For a broader historical view, see MAYNES; SOLAND; BENNINGHAUS, 2005.

²⁴ *The Daily News*, 'The Big Shop', 27 Jan 1912. See NAVA, 2007, pp. 41-54 for an extended discussion of this episode.

²⁵ ZOLA, 1883; see HENNESSY, 2008, pp. 696-706.

²⁶ KRACAUER, 1995, pp. 291-306; pp. 323-330. See ALLEN, 2007; FRISBY, 1986. See also SANDERS, 2006.

²⁷ KRACAUER, 1998, p.73 (cited in BENNER, 2012, pp. 161-162). See also SMITH, 2008.

²⁸ For introduction, see STRANATI, 1995. For more advanced summary, see BROWN et al., 2006.

²⁹ MODLESKI, 1986a, p. 38. See also MODLESKI, 1986b.

³⁰ WARK, 2013; WHITE, 1993; CHRISTIANSEN, 2011; BROWN, 2013.

³¹ See CARR, 1975. One of these earlier incidents had involved their attempt to disrupt the 1970 Miss World contest by detonating a small bomb in a BBC broadcast van outside the Royal Albert Hall, although their involvement in this only later came to light.

³² Cited in CHRISTIANSEN, 2011, p. 53.

³³ Within eighteen months, eight alleged members of the group had been placed on trial. Four would later be convicted of conspiring to cause explosions and would serve long prison sentences.

³⁴ TURNER, 2009. See also TURNER, 2007.