

Draft paper

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Power, cosmopolitanism and socio-spatial division in the commercial arena in Victorian and Edwardian London

The developments of the English Revolution and of the British Empire expedited commerce and transformed the social and cultural status quo of Britain and the world. More specifically in London, the metropolis of the country, in the eighteenth century, there was already a sheer number of retail shops that would set forth an urban world of commerce and consumerism. Magnificent and wide-ranging shops served householders with commodities that mesmerized consumers, giving way to new traditions within the commercial and social fabric of London. Therefore, going shopping during the Victorian Age became mandatory in the middle and upper classes' social agendas. Harrods Department store opens in 1864, adding new elements to retailing by providing a sole space with a myriad of different commodities. In 1909, Gordon Selfridge opens Selfridges, transforming the concept of urban commerce by imposing a more cosmopolitan outlook in the commercial arena.

Within this context, I intend to focus primarily on two of the largest department stores, Harrods and Selfridges, drawing attention to the way these two spaces were perceived when they first opened to the public and the effect they had in the city of London and in its people. I shall discuss how these department stores rendered space for social inclusion and exclusion, gender and race under the spell of the Victorian ethos, national conservatism and imperialism. I shall also argue that they brought about new social, cultural and work space opportunities, transforming social and cultural dynamics and power, being nowadays considered undeniable heritage icons, as they became popular tourist attractions, of the Londoner culture and of the commercial sphere. Lastly, my research will concurrently provide insight into the social history of the Victorian age and the early decades of the twentieth century.

Keywords: cultural identity, social inclusion, cosmopolitanism, power, gender, commercial arena, metropolis, commodities.

1. Introduction

“England is a nation of shopkeepers”, so Adam Smith (1723–1790) claimed on his work *The Wealth of Nations*, in 1776. Adam Smith, a Scottish Enlightenment figure, and considered to be the founder of modern economics, severely criticized government mercantilist and protectionist approaches to the economy. The imposition of high taxes on foreign imports was one of the measures enforced in order to promote domestic industries not only in Britain but also in other European countries. The approval of the Corn Laws in 1815, which enforced high tariffs imported food and grain, represented one step ahead of these protectionist advances by the Tory Government, led by Robert Banks Jenkinson, second Earl of Liverpool. Smith argues against these policies, as he believed the tariffs harmed the nation as a whole, by misdirecting its resources (Smith, 1776). In the defense of the laissez-faire theory, Smith believed the government should play a circumscribed role in the economic life of a country, confining itself to the protection of property rights, the support of a national defense force, and the provision of a few other key public goods (Smith, 1776). The invisible hand would regulate the market system.

Living during the first decades of the Industrial Revolution, Smith was not indifferent to the overarching changes it brought to Britain. In that context, dexterity, saving of time and the invention of machinery embodied the most influential circumstances in the increase of the quantity of work. According to Smith, the division of labour made the society wealthy, as it resulted in the increase of productivity and finally increased wealth. Industrial boom in the second half of the eighteenth century meant more production and hence more labour needs and more labour division and specialization.

This, of course, caused an impact on manufacture and on the commercial sphere. If the big manufactures had more skilled workers, each assigned to specific and specialised tasks, they would be able to produce more and better products. Consequently, more products could be sold, and many shops specialized in very specific items, such as pins, buttons, drapery, gloves, just to name a few, as the factories could furnish people with these items at a faster rhythm and in a shorter amount of time.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 showcased British imperial prowess and pride, industrial power, technological advances and design in a period which embraced the triumph

of free trade over protectionism (Heffer, 2014, p. 285) after the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. The importance given to empiricism, science, technological advances and imperialism would frame the Victorian ethos, which valued first and foremost the progressive mind of the period fostered by a dynamic industrial society, urban growth and an austere and renewed puritanism. The Victorian ethos exalted dedication to work, individualism and the self-help spirit at the same time it dictated a discrete, submissive and compliant behaviour code within a flourishing middle class and its code of specific values, myths and tendencies. Social deference and the respect for institutions and hierarchies would thus be one intrinsic rule of thumb for the middle class.

This wealthy and gradually more influential class, both economically and politically, was also trying to make their way through society, conveniently replicating the aristocratic way of life. A redefinition of a social behaviour and habits was hence mandatory within a society that was highly socially hierarchised. Steinbach (2012) also states this need and highlights the dominion of the middle class in the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain:

By the 1850s, Britain had changed. It was now a more industrialized and urbanized society. The middle class, larger, richer, and more powerful than it had been in 1820, sought to establish itself culturally. Mass production many goods more affordable to the middle class, who forged and performed their identities in part through consumption and display. Literacy was much higher, and books and magazines were more plentiful and cheaper, thanks to the development of machine-made paper, the rotary steam press, and power-binding. Britain was now a middle class nation. (p. 7)

The retail revolution redefined the commercial sphere and created new public spaces that would transform the understanding of the concepts of class, gender and power in late Victorian and Edwardian eras. As Steinbach argues

Industrialization, capitalism, and transportation advances fueled urban growth creating also new manufacturing centres, namely Sheffield, Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool. However, London would remain the leading city in politics, in culture and in commerce. Not only was it the biggest and populated city in Britain, but it also set cultural and commercial trends. Greater London grew up six times in size from “1,096, 789 in 1801 to 7, 160, 441 in 1911” (Ball & Sunderland, 2001, p. 137). According to Tanya Agathocleous (2013, p. xv), besides being Britain’s centre of finance and economy, London was also the big metropolis, the “heart of empire” and the symbol of the nation, but, as the century progressed, became undoubtedly connected with the world.

Transport improvements, the influence and the affluence of a moneyed middle class epitomised the adequate conditions to set up chains of retailers. A new class of entrepreneurial retailers would thus take their chances in London, more specifically in the West End or in posh inner suburbs where land was cheaper and easy to buy, such as Bayswater, Kensington, Brompton Road and Knightsbridge (Ball & Sunderland, 2001, p. 139).

The expansion of shopping throughout the 19th century was hand in hand with economic change within a more liberal political approach to the economy. It thus underwrote the expansion of multiple chains, co-operative societies and department stores. London would also become home to these new commercial spaces which would redefine social and gender roles in society.

Even though other commercial spaces within the Victorian and Edwardian retailing industry must inevitably be mentioned, I will mainly focus on the role that both Harrods and Selfridges played upon late-Victorian and Edwardian society and how they helped to construct, reconfigure and mould dynamics of power, gender issues and class relations. I shall thus sustain the idea that these new spaces became highly influential in both the commercial culture and public sphere in metropolitan London. Women's gradual changing role in society will be discussed as it is inescapably related to the expansion of shopping during the nineteenth century.

This paper is therefore divided in two main parts. In the first part, I shall gather insight into the evolution of shopping and the main changes that occurred since early Victorian Age until late Victorian and Edwardian eras, analysing the consequences of the reconfiguration and empowerment of new places and spaces in London, with a special emphasis on the role of the department stores in the arena of the commercial culture. Finally, attention will be drawn to Harrods and Selfridges comparing both department stores in the way they rendered space for class inclusion or exclusion and how they helped diluting social difference by making society elusively and dynamically utopian homogeneous.

2. Metropolitan London and retail industry: the commercial culture

The emergence of a mass market and of retail revolution in nineteenth century England brought about new patterns of consumption which helped to reconfigure social identities within a renewed commercial sphere. As aforementioned, the revolution in manufacturing and transports made also possible a revolution in commerce which witnessed the spread of chains of retailers and the rise of the multiples, co-operative societies and finally the

department stores. This gradual but groundbreaking change imposed a transformation of people's consumer habits. A consumer revolution was therefore on its way which encompassed paradigmatic transformations in commerce and in society, as regards behaviour and habits.

According to Kelley Graham (2007), "better organized production and lines of supply and distribution (aided by other technologies like the railways) lowered prices for some goods and so put them within the reach of a greater range of English people" (p. 2). This higher volume of goods meant the reduction of retail prices. That's why "societies for the retail sale of goods began to be formed in the 1820s and particularly grew up in numbers in the 1840s" (Ball & Sunderland, 2001, p. 137). Consequently, expansion of shopping accounted for "one of the most visible signs of economic change" throughout the nineteenth century (Ball & Sunderland, 2001, p. 121). The small artisanal shops, established in early industrial Britain, sold food and drink, and the retailers sold dress accessories and sewing items, drapery, and luxury goods. Within these new trading conditions, some of the small trades soon took advantage of these new circumstances that furnished commerce with a wide range of business opportunities. Hence chains of retailers were either acquired or established. The mass market, reconfiguring a new retailing industry in late Victorian and Edwardian eras, sold food stuffs, basic household goods, and clothing (Ball & Sunderland, 2001, p. 135).

Besides small shops and retailers, there were also specialist shops which catered to the consumption of the wealthy in early nineteenth century. The wealthy valued their land possessions and life in the wealthy suburbs as part of the conventionalized *modus vivendi* of upper-class people. However, immersion in metropolitan habits, offering a wide array of goods in addition to luxurious leisure time, was also a compulsory trend. Thus, getting new clothes at the tailors or dressmakers, for example, "was an excuse to go up to town" (Ball & Sunderland, 2001, p. 121). The co-operatives and multiples were set up in the 1820s. Boots, Sainsbury, Lipton and Singer Manufacturing Co, a US multinational company, just to name a few, opened multiple branches all over Britain, serving the customer reliable and competitive price products which met the consumers' need and suitability. The multiples relied on a few basic principles: "pre-packaged and priced products, the prohibition of credit, and heavy advertising" (Searle, 2005, p. 108). Similar to nowadays convenience stores, the multiples "were found in suburban shopping centres and at transport termini" (Ball & Sunderland, 2001, p. 134).

However, 1850s onwards, Britain would witness the expansion of multiple chains, co-operative societies, a peripheral, northern working-class movement which also became

adopted by middle class societies in London, and department stores. We shall then focus on the latter.

2.1. Places and spaces – Big Department stores and their role in the arena of commercial culture

Since medieval times, London has always been the centre of commerce, politics and culture in Britain. During the nineteenth century, the period of British hegemony in the world system, London became the centre of finance and world trade. It's no surprise hence that merchant-bankers immigrated to London and set their business there, as Rodriguez and Feagin (2007) explain:

London developed as a world financial center even before it developed as a national financial center; this speaks for the complexity of regional and world capital circuits that underlie the growth of urban specialization. From the chartering of the Bank of England in 1695 to the end of England's industrial revolution, merchant-bankers were the core of London's financial sector. (p. 37)

The development of the merchant-bankers sector went hand in hand with the growth of many other supportive structures, such as retail stores, "set up in London to cater to the upper classes" as Rodriguez and Feagin (2007, p. 37) argue. Places like London and other industrial cities, e.g. Manchester, have achieved industrial and financial notoriety, being "markets for major primary commodities" (Rodriguez & Feagin, p. 36), at the cost of working class labour, immigration, and railroad investment that boosted a much complex urban network. Nonetheless, London was the big metropolis, the place where it was possible to live different lives, as it was a place where many contrasting social and cultural spaces cohabited. From fancy neighbourhoods, like Belgravia, Chelsea or Knightsbridge, to slum areas or working class neighbourhoods like Southwark or Peckham, London contained however the germ for cosmopolitan, transnational imagined communities, appropriating Benedict Anderson's concept (2006). The craving for experiencing other exotic cultures and goods from far-away and rather unknown places, such as the British colonies, made this imaginative cultural replication part of the consumer culture, substantiated by the discourse of orientalism (Said, 2003). Despite this longing for cultural difference by the upper and middle classes, great part of the population, i.e. the working class, remained oblivious to the existence of Empire (Porter, 2004).

The street represented “forms of life” (Hannerz, 2006, p. 314) where organisational, social and cultural frames would be exhibited. Throughout the nineteenth century, the local scene was already starting to be a spectacle where everybody was “a participant observer”, appropriating Hannerz’s organizational frames which have specific temporal and spatial effects within the world city context nowadays (p. 314). Gas and plate glass, “which revolutionised London shopping” (White, 2016, p. 190), increased the craving for display and ornaments. London shops were spectacularly decorated, and shopping streets became part of a consumer culture which was available to everyone. Conversely, despite the delusive heterogeneity conveyed by the streets, some spaces were still hierarchically distinct and contributed greatly for the social division of the much deferential Victorian London society.

In early nineteenth century London, street sellers, costermongers and hawkers were the ones who played a most active role in shopping. Having the gift of the gab, they would advertise and sell their products some for survival matters and others for business improvement. Lacking refinement, they would not call the attention of the wealthy passers-by, as these would go to the specialist shops buying a tailor-made suit or dress or simply order groceries to be delivered at home. Places like London wholesale markets, e.g. Covent Garden, Leadenhall Market and the Smithfield livestock and horse market (closed in 1855 because of the live animal slaughter which shocked people arbitrated by moral standards within an increasing urban growth) (White, 2016, pp.188-189) would then also be part of the commercial scene, concentrating in an enclosed space stalls and vendors. The itinerant street sellers would also be extinct in the trendiest areas being found only in the poorest neighborhoods (Ball & Sunderland, 2001, p. 122).

Nonetheless, the City of London was, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the most fashionable shopping centre. With the mass market phenomenon, it soon lost its importance giving way to other trendy places, like the West End, as Jerry White (2016) elucidates: “The haemorrhage of people during the 1850s and after hastened decline. Drapers hung on St. Paul’s churchyard into the 1880 but the West End had long taken over. From the early 1820s Regent Street had given London a tremendous fillip” (pp. 190-191).

The birth of the department store was also predominantly a West End phenomenon (Ball & Sunderland, 2001). Displaying a myriad of department stores, multiples and specialist shops, competing among each other, the West End became the best place in the country to shop, also imposing retailing hierarchical differences (Ball & Sunderland, p. 122). Fortnum & Mason, for instance, located in Piccadilly, London, standing as one of the oldest shops founded in early 18th century (1707), succeeded as an upmarket department store,

selling tea and coffee items. Other drapery shops, such as Dickins and Jones (1790), Peter Robinson (1833) and John Marshall (1837) were also set up in the West End. As there was a “huge demand for textile materials and for sewing accessories” (Ball & Sunderland, 2001, p. 139) these shops expanded rather successfully. This triggered the emergence of the department stores in the 1850s, improving upon bazaars which began to appear two decades earlier. Marshall and Snelgrove, a department store in Oxford Street, opened in 1848 (Picard, 2006, p. 134). Operating in large buildings, the department stores, comprising halls, galleries and stalls, would immediately call the attention of the middle-class. Hence, the City of London, the oldest part of the metropolis, soon lost his shopping influence becoming linked to business whereas the West End became a pleasure zone, according to Erika Rappaport (2001). Shopping in these glamorous and enticing stores became a hobby and a “social event” (Searle, 2005, p. 109).

Following the Foucauldian assumption of the inextricable link between pleasure and power, the West End, in becoming a pleasure area, also extended the power, once exclusive to the monarchy and the aristocracy, to the middle-class people. This new pleasure zone involved, in Rappaport’s perception, “new notions of bourgeois femininity, public space, and conceptions of modernity” (Rappaport, p. 5). The retail revolution triggered this transformation in the social and shopping habits of not only men, but mostly women as far as tourism, feminism, pleasure, desire and sexuality were concerned. However, the West End female shopper was associated with a high social rank, making, thus, the bourgeois woman more visible in the public sphere. Women were also allowed moments of pleasure, and shopping represented a cathartic moment for these middle-class women who were imposing unavoidable gender and social changes in the Victorian society. Rappaport (2001) argues that:

public space and gender identities were, in essence, produced together. As the city became a pleasure zone, the shopper was designated as a pleasure seeker, defined by her longing for goods, sights, and public life. At times her desires were understood as sexual, but the Victorians also believed that shopping afforded many bodily and intellectual pleasures. (p. 5)

This new feminine shopper entity opened up new forms of urban space, social and gender heterogeneity whose consequences needed to be unveiled and understood. The mass market unlocked social segregation and the department store would validate this need, even though not so evident at times.

Even though not the focus of my paper, I must also highlight the fact that the West End, apart from glamorous shops shepherding upper and middle classes to this zone, other entertainment places, such as the music halls (e.g. Alhambra, Empire) and restaurants enriched and completed the leisure scene provided by this neighborhood, despite less acceptable moral behaviour fostered by prostitution with which the West End had been associated since the beginning of the abovementioned music halls. Still, the prostitutes could be easily misidentified with the so-called “respectable”, middle-class women, as they were very smartly dressed (White, 2016).

Improved urban transport systems and the expansion of an increasingly wealthier middle class boosted the growth of the department stores (Ball & Sunderland, p. 139; Searle, 2005). The paddle steamers, so popular in the 1840s, omnibus and hansom cabs, common in the 1860s, were replaced with overland and underground railways (Picard, 2006) which encouraged people not only to visit the West End but also suburban shopping centres which were established in trendy areas, such as Bayswater or Knightsbridge, as already mentioned. These were cheaper areas where entrepreneurs and merchants could easily buy more land or add adjacent buildings. In early twentieth century, the opening of main Harrods building in Brompton Road, during 1905, and Selfridges in Oxford Street, in 1909, would be the icing on the cake. These department stores would achieve commercial and social status endowing the places where they were set up with invaluable cultural and commercial worth and power.

The department stores offered very competitive prices as they bought products in big quantities, they provided a wide variety of products as well as a range of free services, such as toilets and art galleries adding to the fact that they were richly ornamented (Ball & Sunderland, 2001). The invention of the escalator and elevator made also possible the addition of new floors as access to them was easier and faster.

The department store was also well-succeeded because it managed to capture the “price-conscious, middle-class market” (Ball & Sunderland, p. 139). Middle-class people wanted to keep up with the sophistication level of the upper-class, but afraid of making fools of themselves, because ignorant of high-fashion, they did not go to the specialist shops. Therefore, going shopping to the big department stores became of the utmost importance for this class in the sense they could show off as they were able to acquire goods that would confer them the prosperity and social status they longed for, as Searle (2005) so well describes:

its supply of an array of very different goods under one roof formed the main attraction, allied with the eye-catching displays which encouraged impulse buying. But again, the department stores had a strict policy of no credit and fixed-price labelling – the latter serving the purpose of allowing upwardly mobile but unsophisticated customers to look at household goods of which they had had no previous experience to find out whether they could afford them – without having to ask and risk making fools of themselves. (p. 109)

The department store created spaces where everyone could mingle, but still being anonymous. This space reconfiguration was still subject to the social, cultural, political and economic conditions in a period where imperialism was at its peak.

Three of the largest department stores in London were Whiteleys, founded in 1863, and known as the ‘Universal Provider’ (Rappaport, p. 17); Harrods, opened in 1864; and Selfridges, inaugurated in 1909. Next, we shall shed some light on the importance of Harrods and Selfridges in the reconfiguration of new commercial, more inclusive/exclusive and cosmopolitan spaces in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras.

3. Harrods and Selfridges: power, cosmopolitanism, social and cultural dynamics

Harrods became an overwhelming emporium due to the initial investment of Charles Henry Harrod who owned a grocery store in Stepney (1833) and then in 1849 opened a grocery shop in Brompton Road. However, it soon started to sell patent medicines, perfumes and stationary when Charles Henry Harrod’s son, Charles Digby Harrod, envisioning a more solid and expanding project, started to manage the store. In 1864, the Harrods Department store opens (Graham, 2008). Attempting to face the exorbitant prices charged by the old established businesses in the West End, he adopted the method of the co-operatives retailing. No credit was allowed, and thus prices could be reduced, and advertising was made by means of sending out circulars to the better-classes houses, and all delivered “goods were free of charge” (Harrod, 2017, p. 127). Charles Digby refused to employ barkers, employees who “stood in front of the shop or walked the local streets to solicit customers by shouting out loud sales spiel.” (Harrod, 2017, p. 121)

By 1880 Harrods employed 100 staff and by 1913 it had nine floors and a turnover of 4 million pounds (Ball & Sunderland, 2001). After the fire destroying Harrods’ store, in

1883, Harrods was reconstructed with “great exuberance and scale”¹. The opening of the Piccadilly tube railway in 1906 raised the importance of this area, with two stations, Knightsbridge and Brompton Road, being set up. This definitely made the street and, consequently, Harrods quick to reach.

Despite very persuasive merchandising skills, and the lower prices of high-quality products, the department store aimed at luring upper and high-middle class shoppers. Going to Harrods in late Victorian England represented a social event where, apart from doing some shopping, people wanted to be seen and see others. In addition to that, according to Robin Harrod (2017), “Charles Digby attracted ‘celebrity’ clients of the era, and Lily Langtry, Ellen Terry and Oscar Wilde were amongst those that were allowed the first weekly accounts.” (p. 153).

Selfridges was the second largest purpose-built department store in London. Others had been the result of added buildings, like Harrods. Opening its doors to the world in 1909, Selfridges intended to deviate customers from Harrods and Whiteleys by introducing window dressing displaying a wide array of products, always at the lowest prices, that couldn’t be found anywhere else. Merchandise of the world was then promised to be supplied. Announcing a cosmopolitan essence, the one hundred departments would “supply nearly every requirement of daily life” for everyone, as the invitation so effusively advertised.² Selfridges provided the customers with new services, “including a silence room, a library, an information bureau, and an American barber’s shop and soda fountain” (Ball & Sunderland, 2005, p. 140). A children’s play area and a roof garden would then be added.

Gordon Selfridge, a self-made man, self-educated midwestern American man, came to England in 1906 and opened his store three years later. A supporter of women’s rights and a cosmopolitan moderniser, Selfridge employed many women, representing the majority of his staff, as well as promoted cultural mixing and a cosmopolitan outlook (Nava, 2007). In 1914, celebrating the 5th anniversary, Gordon Selfridge would write in *The Spirit of Modern Commerce: Selfridge’s Fifth Anniversary Souvenir Book* the following words:

It is our belief that no commercial Institution in the world is more truly entitled to the inscription “Cosmopolitan” than in ours. Here meet and mingle representations of many of the world’s races, differing in customs, looks, and tongues. Here East meets West and North the South, and here displayed in almost inconceivable variety merchandise

¹ 'Brompton Road: Introduction', in *Survey of London: Volume 41, Brompton*, ed. F H W Sheppard (London, 1983), pp. 1-8. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol41/pp1-8>

² *The Bystander*, March 10, 1909 apud Nava (2007).

from every source of supply and from every important manufacturing centre under heaven. (apud Nava, 2007, p. 23)

This cosmopolitan outlook was seen as somewhat daring by the ones who defended English patriotic tradition and opposed to the big department stores as they were tantamount to the destruction of an idyllic notion of Englishness where small shops and retailers substantiated that longed national character. Mica Nava in *Visceral Cosmopolitanism* (2007) exposes in a very clarifying way the conflict between G.K. Chesterton and Selfridge which the author called “The Big Shop controversy” (41). Chesterton published ‘The Big Shop’ in 1912 in the *Daily News* heavily criticising Selfridges and the women working there:

... artistically and socially [the large modern shop] is exactly like hell. The ladies who minister to the shoppers are made exactly like the dress-models that stand beside them. 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 with her. ...The models [are] dressed so well and the women trained so ill, you can hardly tell the difference but for some outstanding detail – such as the absence of a head ... (Nava, p. 50)

The women felt outrageously attacked, accusing Chesterton of ignorance, and replied to him by means of empathetic protests, defending their working conditions at Selfridges, “one of the new feminised spaces of the social” (Nava, 53):

We are proud to say that we feel as women workers we have in our ranks some of the brightest intelligences associated with commerce, or that part which is handled equally by women and men. (...) We look upon ourselves as members of a ‘Business Republic’, for each department is represented on a Staff Parliament or Council where free speech, free thought and general initiative is expected to be shown on all occasions. (p. 53)

Nava defined this controversy as a dispute between “Cultural imaginaries of an idealised static past” versus “a dynamic utopian future in the arena of commercial culture” (p. 42).

Women, however, were gradually imposing their presence in the public sphere and the commercial domain. Whereas in the first half of the nineteenth century women jobs in the commercial sphere were not open to women, after 1850, women started to gradually, but somehow rather daringly, to give the first steps towards the public sphere. As we are told by Liza Picard, “The Society for Promoting the Employment for Women encouraged women to be clerks, telegraphists, shop assistants and nurses” (p. 306). Nonetheless, the fabric of Victorian society was still based on strict and almost unreachable social ranks. Primary

Education became only compulsory in 1870 with the approval of the Forster's Education Act. This embodied the need for instructing and civilising the ignorant masses who needed Christian guidance and learn the basics: reading, writing, arithmetic plus religious instruction.

Climbing the social ladder was something inconceivable as everyone knew their place in society from cradle to death. Notwithstanding this assumed assumption, work conditions for both working-class and middle-class women started to be more favourable regarding other jobs besides home service or work at the factories or even at markets or street-selling. To come to terms with the middle-class needs and desire to spend money, the shops needed to employ more staff. Space for women was thus opened up. New social groups spread, such as commercial travellers, lower-middle class of clerks and shop assistants, and gained more affluence (Searle, p. 109). Charles Digby Harrod would only hire the first woman in 1885 (Harrod, 2017). Attracted by the prospects of a better life and by the high status normally associated with these department stores, young women would try their luck and apply for a job there. The job of shop assistant, mainly in dress-making and millinery departments, became thus more disseminated and 'normalised' in late-Victorian and Edwardian eras, despite the still dominant patriarchal staff management. However, women were expected to leave this job on marriage. Therefore, young women were mainly employed and only a few remained beyond the age of 40. The death rate among shop assistants was also high due to the long hours standing as they worked from 8 am to 9 pm, the lack of fresh air, and poor food (Picard, 2005; Ball & Sunderland, 2001)³. Christopher Hosgood (1999) characterised these places as "mercantile monasteries" where shop-assistants lived in and spent most of the time behind the counter. Apprentices had to follow very strict indentures, such as abstinence from alcoholic drinks, attendance to Sunday Schools, regular attendance to "Divine Service in a chapel, morning and evening" and "never be out of the premises after 10 o'clock without having obtained special permission from the firm" (Picard, p. 308). Women had to wear smartly and respectably and be most polite to the customers despite having to endure such harsh behind-the-scene conditions.

The empowerment of women became more visible in the last decades of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The creation of women's rights movements such as London Society Women's Suffrage and the militancy of the suffrage movement, led by Emmeline Pankhurst and then by her daughter Christabel Pankhurst, became more hopeful and militant in the Edwardian era, after the purposeless attempts of women's enfranchisement

³ This information can also be found on <http://www.victorianlondon.org/professions/shopassistants.htm>

within the Reform Act of 1867. In mid-Victorian age, women like Helen Taylor, Barbara Bodichon and Emily Davies had already started the organised women's franchise movement, by creating committees, e.g. – *Enfranchisement of Unmarried Women and Widows possessing the necessary property qualifications* – and “launching petitioning campaigns” (Rendall, 2000, p.135). The suffragettes would adopt more extreme measures and would be made visible by ways of public demonstrations and protests. The West End represented the perfect location for this visibility. By going to the West End, a prestigious and powerful place, feminist militants would call attention to their cause, even though it meant radical protests such as breaking windows. As Rappaport (2001) argues, “public identities and public spaces” were “sanctified by the new commerce to reshape national politics and the public sphere” (p. 221). The department stores would also take advantage of this visibility by selling “suffrage paraphernalia and fashions and advertised in the feminist papers” (Rappaport, p. 220).

It is in this context that Selfridge also promoted his business, supporting the women's cause in the defence for suffrage rights. Selfridges' shop assistants claimed to be well treated in a space where they felt equal, included and free as abovementioned letter they addressed to G. K. Chesterton. The identification with the company was a rather effective strategy (semi-consciously) adopted by Gordon Selfridge to keep the levels of productivity high (Nava, p. 56). Moreover, this new social and work place would become a more powerful, pleasurable and feminised space.

Nonetheless, these apparent democratic and cosmopolitan spaces were shadowed by a strong attachment to and nurturing of a high sense of social status by the Victorians and Edwardians. The obsession with status distinctions divided classes internally and also affected the consumer culture and its spaces, as Searle (2005) so well put it:

Shopping, for example, could divide as well as unite the consuming public. Thus some department stores went to considerable lengths to keep working-class customers in their place by opening up bargain basements that could be reached without entering the main store, which was patrolled by intimidating shopwalkers. Working-class housewives, for their part, preferred to stick to shops where they felt at home: 'co-ops', corner shops, and chain stores. Subtle distinctions of status also divided each class internally. Middle-class shoppers, for example, understood that there was a hierarchy of department stores, with Harrods, Whiteley, and Debenhams & Freebody at the top, Selfridges at the bottom. (p. 112)

Selfridges, adopting a cosmopolitan, democratic approach to the mass market, thus became a more social inclusive space for the staff working there. Regarding the shoppers, it catered to a wider range of people, as everyone was welcome to get in, including the lower

middle-class and even the working class, while most of the times the latter could not afford buying its products or couldn't find the time to allow them some pleasurable moments or simply because the luxurious, highly ornamented departments scared them away. Selfridge wanted his store to be not merely a place for shopping, but a social centre where everyone felt comfortable and took advantage of the many goods on display. Conversely, Harrods became more confined to and associated with higher social status, despite its motto "Omnia omnibus ubique" that is "Everything for Everybody, Everywhere" (Harrod, 2017, p. 7).

4. Conclusions

In the later part of the nineteenth-century, urban growth in England became a reality fostered by transport improvements, liberalism and capitalism. Retailing and the new mass market brought about social and cultural changes in a country where social deference to the highest ranks in society was inextricably linked with a highly stratified society and with devotion to tradition and strict moral and social codes of behaviour. The middle-class highly valued and respected hierarchies and institutions. However, the Victorian society was rather dichotomic. On the one hand, there was devotion to family, marriage and Christian values, but, on the other, there were high prostitution rates. If education was seen as an important leitmotif for progress of the individual and of the mind and, consequently, of society, child labour was still a reality. Employers lived an opulent lifestyle, whereas the working class struggled to survive. London was the metropolis where these contrasts were highly present, but sometimes hidden or not made visible. Keeping up the appearance and an expected behaviour not to be judged by society was paramount. Therefore, people were expected to be seen and live in places according to their social rank. It was unthinkable to see upper-class or middle-class people promenading in slums, for example. However, the retailing revolution and the mass market diluted this spatial difference, that is, by creating spaces that catered to all types of people, such as multiples, bazaars, and department stores, the feeling of shared spaces and social homogeneity was somehow felt. In the West End, as we highlighted, prostitutes were easily confused with respectable high society ladies. Thus, the visible city (Agathocleous, 2013) hid the invisible world of prostitution, vice and crime. Department stores and luxurious specialist shops coexisted with women's clubs, music halls and restaurants. The West End and trendy inner suburbs became the centre of shopping and leisure par excellence which conferred them power and influence as, by creating luxurious

spaces, spatial social barriers were built and reconfigured. Social homogeneity was hitherto illusory. But these public spaces also became political and feminine spaces as the West End and department stores were at the centre of protests and manifestations set forth by the Suffragettes in the early twentieth century. Demanding political rights, middle-class women claimed for more social inclusion and financial independence so as to challenge the manhood suffrage and the patriarchal model of society.

The expansion of department stores furnished women with power and independence. Despite the common inhuman working conditions, these spaces gave women other visibility beyond the one confined to the private sphere. These changes were hard and slow to achieve as Victorian people still feared the massification of culture and society in the sense this would destroy the decent moral values in a society that highly praised tradition and hierarchies. This would remain until the First World War which shook these preconceived ideas of society.

As such, these fears were sustained upon “misunderstandings and delusions” (Searle, p. 111). The most skeptical and supporters of enduring English patriotic past traditions, highlighted, for example, in G.K. Chesterton’s writings about department stores which caused so much stir in the commercial space of Selfridges, were suspicious of these modern trends as they would mean the destruction of Englishness sustained upon tradition and patriotism. Others, like Harry Selfridge, adopted a cosmopolitan approach sustained on the progressive and modern spirit of the age, by promoting racial and gender difference, visible in the employment of women staff doing all sorts of jobs (e.g. shop assistants, window cleaners, lift attendants), and by displaying merchandise coming from the British Empire.

Selfridge was somehow far ahead of his time, as racial prejudice still endured in a time when the British justified their presence in the Empire based on the discourse of social Darwinism and Lamarckian notions of cultural superiority, instilling thus the white man supremacy upon the colonies together with the idea of the mission spirit in the attempt of civilising the savage people of the Empire, justifying thus the imposition of the west upon the east. By displaying exotic goods or even people in Selfridges, or even Harrods, Selfridges was colluding with the discourse of orientalism (Said, 2003), or, as Nava argues, Selfridge’s cosmopolitanism was still sustained on a rather utopian and innocent perception of the world.

However, we cannot deny the fact that department stores reshaped commercial culture and delusively constructed inclusive spaces buttressed by advantageous social, economic and political circumstances. They became more democratic in the sense that they initiated rituals of shopping available to everyone and made it highly profitable not only in the arena of commerce but also in the area of tourism. In the last decades of the twentieth century, with

the phenomenon of globalization, department stores, shopping centres mushroomed throughout the world. Renowned brands can be found anywhere imprinting cultural homogenisation in a highly technological and globalised world.

Selfridges and Harrods are nowadays cultural icons of London as they epitomize not only progress and modernity but at the same time tradition and a lingering attachment to the past. The West End and Knightsbridge are still envisioned as trendy and powerful places as other spaces were also constructed, such as museums and parks. They became more accessible places, despite the still exorbitant prices. Everyone can in fact enter there and feel a rather cosmopolitan atmosphere. Harrods however is still more renowned than Selfridges as it managed to sell an image of opulence, elegance, and internationalism through strong advertising and marketing strategies.

To conclude, the mass market helped to dilute social differences in a highly hierarchical society by creating a (delusive) sense of homogenisation. The setting up of small businesses throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century boosted the economy of England, strengthened by the self-help spirit and the entrepreneurship of visionary businessmen. England is still a nation of shopkeepers, big or small, with lingering marketable traditions but always forward-looking.

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