LEOPOLDINA FORTUNATI

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Gender and the Mobile Phone

Leopoldina Fortunati

INTRODUCTION

As the mobile phone grows into a multimedia device and becomes mobile media, one dominant issue has continued to haunt the device throughout its various permutations and incarnations. The rise of mobile media could be clearly read in terms of arising and existing gender inequalities that stretch across many notions of mobility and immobility. The purpose of this paper is to use the lens of the mobile media to reflect upon constructions of gender over the last couple of decades. One of the central arguments of this paper is the need to problematize categories such as gender, generation, domestic sphere, social relationships, family, and so on. I argue that often these notions are used in a statistical, aseptic way. With the plenitude of sociological debates around notions of mobility spanning at least a decade, I argue that we have an expansive and sophisticated material in which to expand upon debates around gender. In particular, I will focus upon the intersections between questions of gender, generations, and especially domestic sphere categories. I argue that it is time to develop research that is specifically designed to study the role, meaning, representations, models, and practices of use of the mobile phone beginning from women's life conditions.

Even a cursory survey of the empirical work on gender and the mobile phone to date generally shows—with few exceptions—research methodologies that unproblematically take the masculine situation as a central precept. When gendered performativity is analyzed, it is often done so in comparison—the "feminine" is defined in terms of the "masculine." Or, as it happens more often than not, there are seemingly no significant differences between the behavior of men and women. This lack of differences, however, is rarely discussed: thus, leaving a series of questions unanswered. What does it mean to say that there are not significant differences between men and women? Does it mean that the differences between men and women are diminishing, or does it mean that differences exist, but they become indiscernible in current research agendas? To rectify this dilemma, the first step might be to alternate our direction of inquiry. Instead, we should ask questions such as: What types of experiences and agencies does the mobile phone give to women? Does the mobile phone serve, for instance, to reduce time, fatigue, and costs related to the double work (housework and the waged work) or not? Does the mobile phone serve to improve on the whole the social condition of women or not?

In regard to the methodological issues, there is an urgent need for a reconceptualization of the research tools, by which we mean not only specific techniques, but the whole level of methodological resources. For example, has the explicatory and predictive capacity of the gender variable changed? It is impossible to answer this question right now: what we can do now is use these research questions to establish a future research agenda. Concepts, indicators, variables, techniques, and tools should be reconceptualized, reviewed, and replanned, in order to be able to deal effectively with this particularly elusive object that is social change connected with gender.

GENDER, GENERATION, AND THE MOBILE PHONE

In the first wave of research on the mobile phone, both women and men were explored in a coy manner in regard to their sociological complexity as social actors. This initial wave of research was limited in that it rarely problematized the gender category from a sociological point of view. Women, like men, have been considered, in general, as an operational category simply characterized by the self-definition on the part of respondents. But gender category is, of course, more complex than this: it is a social construction and representation; it is a model or, better, a series of models; it is a set of individuals, familiar, and social roles; it is a body of images and figures.[1] Furthermore, implicated in the issue of gender are also the underlining modes of gendered labor and politics of time/space, particularly prevalent in discussions around reproductive labor.[2]

A second limitation with this initial research was that although the majority of these research projects looked at the diffusion, adoption, and use of the mobile phone in the domestic sphere and everyday life—as exemplified by the domestication approach[3]—these two notions of gender and domesticity have been rarely problematized. They too remained as background notions, like narrative tools used to give an idea of a specific framework in which the use and appropriation of the mobile phone was taking place, but which were never defined on a sociological level, that is, in their economic and social functionality in respect to the whole economic system. A third shortcoming of this first decade of research was perhaps the lack of historicization of social phenomena connected to the use of the mobile phone. The diffusion and appropriation of the mobile phone has taken place vis-a-vis specific generations of adolescents, children, and women roughly from 1995 till now. And it is necessary to know much more about them from a social, economic, and political point of view.

Thus, to make the next wave of research more sophisticated, first of all we need to expand upon the question of gender in the light of the recent debates on this topic. When we observe and try to understand differences in social behavior, we should take in account that the attribution to a gender needs to be understood as a socially constructed notion that is different from a biological sex. Post structural theorists such as Judith Butler[4] and Kate Bornstein[5] argued that we are constantly in the process of *becoming* a gender rather than *being* a gender. So, the social "rules" shape gender change on the basis of the continued transformations that the social construction of "masculinity" and "femininity" undergoes. According to Butler, gender is not a primary or "real" category but an attribute, a set of secondary narrative effects that are both performed and regulated.

So, in our research we should bear in mind that the category of "gender"— like identity— is highly dynamic and subject to sociocultural forces. In particular, this reconceptualization of gender is enlightening, especially in the context of the relatively underexplored "feminine" approach to technology[6] in the studies of the mobile phone.

This understanding of gender allows a closer examination of stereotypes around gendered usage of technology. Moreover, through this understanding of gender we can gain greater acuity into the rise of the mobile phone ties to overtly gendered formations. There are various levels in the role of gender, and notions of the feminine operate within mobile media culture. Firstly, the role of the "feminine" is integral in the design process. The first mobile phones were, like many other information and communication technologies (ICTs), aimed at young adult white and affluent men. From the start, mobile phones were conceived as a tool for male yuppies.[7] Secondly, we need to factor in time issues: when a technology is conceived for a particular segment of the population, the other potential buyers need time to understand how they can adapt the

technology to their needs. It is these users (second and third wave of users) who generally redesign and reconfigure the device: a phenomenon marked by gender and modes of feminizing the technology.

Lastly, it depends on the demographic of women: age is a key variable to predict to what extent feminine behavior differs significantly or not from that of men. Young generations of women now show very modest parameters of difference. Often, as in the case of mobile phone practices, these differences are expressed in the form of disadvantage in comparison to their male counterpart.[8] Young women, adolescents, and children were able to reduce in a very short time the "delay" that has accompanied in general the adoption of mobile phones (and also computer and internet) by women.[9] In a few years young women had surpassed the usage by young men but also overcame them. These social dynamics should be studied with great attention—taking into account that that girls' and female adolescents' power is weakened by the fact that adult and mature women have less social power, which, in turn, influences the deployment of certain technologies. The minor social power of women in general inevitably tends to lower expectation for younger women, and this element might explain why age, in many situations, is a factor of social aggregation that overrides the significance of gender, class, ethnicity, and so on.

On the whole, women's approach to the mobile phone developed in a way not so different from that expressed towards the old communication technologies and mass media. The schema was always the same: men opened the way and then women slowly followed, trying to adapt to their interests and needs the new technology present in the market. However, this was not the case with domestic appliances which were expressly designed for women; and with which women are at ease, while men are, in many cases, incompetent and hostile.

Gender has already been widely recognized as a fundamental dimension in the whole negotiation process which takes place between society and the technological world, made up by several actors—such as innovators, policymakers, users, operators, and manufacturers, to name but a few. As Ellen van Oost has argued, "the process of shaping gender and technology are closely intertwined. One can even speak of a 'co-construction of gender and technology".[10] This means that it is very important to develop a robust analysis of the role and position women, in order to register and understand how men and women co-construct the different technologies in a specific way.

Women, for instance, tend to focus upon the physicality and functionality of the mobile phone. Women have negotiated the design of the keyboard and in general of the entire body of the mobile phone with operators and manufacturers. The mobile phone has become cute, colored, and fashionable. The introduction of "feminine" services and applications has increased the possible modes of gender performativity from calendars for menstrual cycles, calories calculations, camera phone genres," and so on. For this reason, it is particularly pertinent to understand whether the new wave of mobile phone (Universal Mobile Telecommunications System [UMTs] and 3G technologies)—which are more technologically and aesthetically sophisticated than the current ones—will attract women faster compared to Total Access Communication System (TACS) and Global System for Mobile, originally Groups Spécial Mobile (GSM). This last issue is specifically important, because we need to figure out if, and to what extent, the feminine approach to innovations—and empowerment—is changing.

This reconceptualization of categories is necessary not only in respect to the notion of gender but also *generation*. Although a large part of the studies on mobile

communication focused on adolescents and teens, that is, generations born in the second part of the seventies and in the eighties, the notion of generation has rarely been challenged. Research on "age" implicitly related to "youth"; anything not encompassed by youth was often seen as boring and not worthy of research. What type of generation do we talk about? In much of the research, the category of generation is implicitly treated as an age cohort.[12] In the majority of these studies the notion of generation was used instrumentally without any specific reflection. The minimalist concept of generation that emerges here is added proof that a very fundamental question has been avoided: what are the distinctive social, cultural, and political identity of this generation made up by teens and adolescents in the nineties?

Unquestionably, a reconceptualization of the notion of generation would provide new insight into why, historically, this was the first generation to be impacted by mobile technology. From the outset, the mobile phone has been able to attract adolescents much more rapidly than adults. Adolescents and teens of this generation were in the majority of cases only children. Not having any brother or sister, they probably saw in the mobile phone a powerful tool to guarantee to themselves in the family the virtual presence of somebody of the same age. Through the mobile phone, the communicative fluxes with their peers could continue at home. It was looking at this phenomenon that we talked of the social construction of virtual brotherhood and sisterhood.[13] Given that copresence in the peer community was possible for this generation of adolescents and teens only in a fragmented way, it is easy to understand why mobile communication became—for these generations—the bridge that allowed for the continuity of their peer relationships in the different places of everyday life (school, family, sport, and so on).

But this, of course, is only an aspect of the problem. Why, for instance, was this generation able to win more power inside the family than in the political and social word? It is a matter of fact that while these adolescents were able to become the main explorers and users of mobile technology, they didn't take an analogous initiative in changing social and political rules, attitudes, and behavior towards them.[14] We need to understand better their situation, the specific factors involved. For example, consider factors such as increasingly inclusive schools and a hostile job market that offered little to these new generations. This situation, in part, explains why this generation produced moments of "Durkheimian effervescence," like the no-global movement.

Furthermore, the generation of the nineties in Eastern countries and in Germany lived through the fall of the Berlin wall and the redesign of the political Europe, experimenting with a new sense of transnational identity. In other words, this mobile generation is characterized not only by the experience and practices of the mobile phone use but also by broad social, economic, and political changes in the family, in the relationships among peers and between parents and children, in the labor market, in the educational world, and so on. Here are but some examples of the many reasons why the uptake of mobile technologies was so rampant amongst this generation, thus establishing a template for future generations. It would be important that next wave of research could give back to these generations a high sociological thickness that helps us to provide answers to the several open-ended questions left hanging.

DOMESTIC SPHERE AND MOBILE PHONE

Another notion that is necessary to challenge is that of the domestic sphere, the setting where the greatest numbers of researchers have chosen to analyze mobile-phone use. We need to understand this issue better in order to avoid the domestic sphere remaining as a minimalist and instrumental context. How can we define the sphere of everyday

life from a sociological point of view? Of course, feminist tradition can offer much acuity upon the assumptions about gendered space and labor inequalities. The classics of feminist thought have analyzed and depicted everyday life as the place made up by family, house, housework, marriage, birth, life, and death and where the most precious commodity for our societies is built: the labor force, the human being.

The plurality of feminist approaches, whilst being pivotal, has had many problems in the distribution within the academic world. Here centuries of hostile tradition towards everyday life have created strong inertia and resistance to this discourse. Romantic literature (let alone classical) and a large part of the philosophical and economical tradition condemned almost without appeal everyday life to represent the place of the ugly, trivial, insignificant, unproductive, the mere survival. The aporias of the culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have produced an opposition between "what happens every day" and extraordinary or, at least, significant events that happen in the public sphere.[15]

Henri Lefévre[16] and Michel de Certeau[17] analyzed with great inspiration everyday life; more recently, the late Roger Silverstone[18] looked at this sphere trying to understand the logic that governs it, proposing the notion of "moral economy." Remembering his unflagging work, we recall that he created inspiration to study the role of ICTs in the domestic sphere,[19] proposing the "domestication theory" in order to understand the integration of ICTs in everyday life.

Here I would like to merge together specific feminist analysis of the domestic sphere and debates on social capital. These two branches of debate might help us to reconceptualize the notion of the domestic sphere in a more complex way. As I have argued elsewhere, the reproductive sphere is made up by family, housework and care work, leisure, social interactions, communication, organization, education, entertainment, affects, love, and sex.[20] Analyzing the reproduction sphere by moving beyond Marxian categories, in earlier research I have showed how the sphere of everyday life, although it represents itself as a sphere that naturalizes process, is as much productive for the general socioeconomic system as the sphere where commodities and services are produced and contributes in fundamental terms to the valorization process, to the production of surplus value.[21] The debate on social capital allows us to enlarge this notion of reproductive sphere and include also information, knowledge, civil engagement, and culture. Today it is not unusual to find scholars discussing human, cultural, or social capital within the context of the mobile phone. [22] However, the variety of definitions of this term and the variety of disciplines implicated in the debate (sociology, education, economics, business, political science, and organizational behavior) mean that we need to clarify, even if briefly, a working definition.

For Marx, workers were the only elements of the capitalist process that were able to produce a variation (in term of augmentation) of the value, while machines and instruments of labor could only release their value. For this reason, Marx called workers "variable" capital and machines "fixed" capital. Marxian analysis was unfortunately restricted only to the sphere of commodities production: the factory world. In 1953, Selma James gave a vivid description of how this "variable capital"—that is, people—was reproduced essentially by women in the domestic sphere.[23] She showed how—and at what personal price—women contribute to gross domestic product (GDP). Her text, written in the height of the cold war, is particularly important because it describes with lucidity the contradictions and the real feelings of women who were divided between

the house and the place of work in a town, Los Angeles, at that time with a strong internal immigration.

In 1961, Jane Jacobs wrote about the value of informal interpersonal relationships.[24] Although she never used the term *social capital*, Jacobs underlined how these relationships are crucial for the functioning of complex and highly organized societies. Jacobs understood that value production, being a process, could not stop inside the walls of the factory and that outside the factory, in the reproduction world, an analogous process had to exist. She saw this value, this "capital," as the amount of informal social relationships. The limit of her vision was that she stopped at this stage, without looking at the work process which was behind interpersonal relationships, and which has in turn its specific "workers."

Three years later, Gary Becker argued that education, training, and knowledge of individuals in general are crucial factors for the productivity of nations and introduced the notion of human capital.[25] With the expression *human capital*, he stressed the importance of these elements for the valorization process. He argued that in industrialized countries human capital would represent 80 percent of the whole wealth of these countries. In Becker's approach, human capital is produced by family efforts and public investments in the education system. However, by focusing generically on family efforts, this prevented him from recognizing the specific role played by women on this. "Human capital" is, in a sense, produced by means of an unwaged labor—that is, housework and care work. In the domestic sphere, housework produces not only education and knowledge but also, more largely, the whole subsistence of new generations—starting from their existence, birth, and bodies.

To complete Becker's analysis on valorization, one should include also all the labor involved for the entire existence and subsistence of people, not only the segment of education. In the seventies Maria Rosa Dalla Costa[26] took up where Selma James's analysis finished. She put together all the pieces of the puzzle—housework, pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, double work, love, sex, education, social relationships, and so on—to outline a coherent framework in which all these tessera came together. This site, the domestic sphere, was analyzed as the sphere where the most precious commodity, the labor force in the form of the individual, is produced and reproduced every day.

Influenced by feminism, Michel Foucault[27] introduced another point of view on the issue of valorization, in the domestic sphere, by focusing on population. He underlined the value represented by population for a country and analyzed the political mechanisms allowing the control of population fluxes, dimensions, and changes through the notion of biopower. According to Foucault, in the eighteenth century, biopower developed in two directions: on the one hand, it introduced practices of discipline and education among individuals, and, on the other hand, it tried to control population, as a machine to produce wealth, goods, or other individuals. Especially, in the second half of seventeenth century, continues Foucault, a series of issues, which were connected to this new value recognized to population, began to be debated: habitat, material and social conditions of urban life, public hygiene, changes in the relation between birthrate and death rate. According to Foucault, it was clear that the capitalist state needed to regulate population fluxes in order to strengthen its power; sex and reproduction become fundamental elements in the political transformation of society. However, again, within Foucault's analysis the problem of production and reproduction of labor force was considered starting from the end, not from the beginning. The value of population was seen in fact as a given data, a "natural" output.

Pierre Bourdieu's[28] notion of social and cultural capital adds some new elements to this picture of everyday life. In particular, he saw social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition".[29] This notion of social capital, which will be taken up later on by James Coleman[30] and Robert Putnam, was a new opening towards considering social relations as something closely connected to capital and its valorization. However, this definition, I argue, is incorrect, because it refers to a kind of capital that belongs to individuals, whereas social relations and contacts represent instead one of the territories of the immaterial production that works as a means of valorization for the capital in the reproductive sphere.

Coleman broadened the concept of social capital, defining it as anything that supports and facilitates both individual and collective action. In his vision, networks of relationships, reciprocity, trust, and social norms generate social capital. Putnam enlarged further the concept of social capital, including civic engagement and talking about bonding and bridging social[31] capital. Furthermore, he saw social capital as a resource possessed not only by individuals but also by collectives and communities. The debate on social capital has in time become very complex: Roberto Cartocci and Valerio Vanelli showed that the use of this concept is a kind of torsion of the Marxian notion of variable capital.[32] In any case, for our purposes it is sufficient to refer to the main important ideas developed inside this debate.

So how do all these themes relate to the domestic sphere? How do the ICTs enter in this working process? They enter as devices that are activated to support all the various activities that can be included under the wide umbrella of reproduction labor. This labor is made up by, in part, still a large amount of *material labor* (cook, shop, clean, wash, iron, etc.) but also by an increasing part of *immaterial labor*: organization, communication, information, entertainment, civil and political engagement, education, interaction, affects, love, sex. Material and immaterial labor converge to create value, a surplus value that is embodied in human beings. The other side of the variable capital is exactly this: the production of domestic capital.

This notion of domestic or reproductive capital includes, systematizes, and enlarges the notions of human and social capital. In this framework, the mobile phone, like the other information and communication technologies, works on the side of *immaterial reproduction*. Each of these technologies is adapted to support one or more aspects of the immaterial labor in the everyday sphere. Drawing from the current research, the mobile phone supports various forms of communication, information, organization, social relationships, contacts, civil and political engagement. It helps to carry out all these types of immaterial reproductive labor. The diffusion of the mobile phone can be seen as an increase in what Karl Marx calls "fixed capital"—that is, machines. Machinery, first accumulated at the specific sites of factories, is now spread and appropriated also in the domestic sphere. So, the typical user of fixed capital is no longer the classic worker in a factory or firm but, rather, women and in general the ordinary citizen in his or her domestic sphere. In this sphere, the mobile phone might be considered as a *work tool for reproduction*. That is, a tool that supports and facilitates almost all the aspects of immaterial reproductive labor, which are increasingly complex and exponential in influence.

In other words, the mobile phone, as emblem of an extraordinary development of mechanization of immaterial labor, helps to rationalize the management of the immaterial reproductive sphere and to increase the production of value in this sphere.

This device—and in general ICTs—have, on the one hand, strengthened and, on the other hand, transformed reproductive labor into an increasingly mediated, self-reproductive, and self-disciplinary form. Not only has it grown greatly in the domestic sphere, but also it has done this to the detriment of the material labor of reproduction, which, in part, has been suppressed or expelled from houses and subjected to outsourcing.[33] Furthermore, the logic that governs the sphere of reproduction of the labor force has been exported into the world of production of goods, where there is today a strong presence of immaterial, unpaid, scarcely defined legally, precarious work, and so on.

So as reproduction is extending its dominion over society today, the mobile phone has become also a strategic tool of social labor. But why do I speak of only women and not of the ordinary citizen? This is because immaterial reproductive labor occurs on different levels to all individuals, women and men as well as children and adults. In this sense, the carrying out of immaterial reproductive labor pertains to all individuals and citizens. Each individual has a double role in the domestic sphere, where he or she is producer and consumer at the same time. The quantity and the quality of reproductive labor are negotiated in different ways—according to the historical moment, social and political relationships—between genders and generations and different cultures. However, even recent research show that there are those who consume more (children, adult males, the elderly) and those who continue to work more, even if less than once (women).[34] In sum, if we want to understand the socioeconomic role of the mobile phone, we need to revisit feminist debates around social capital. Only in this framework does the mobile phone shows its identity as a machine, which is set up and used as a work tool for immaterial reproductive labor within the social processes governing everyday life.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I called upon the urgent need for mobile communication researchers to problematize the sociological categories that we activate in our empirical research. In particular, I have showed one of the possible ways to reconceptualize this terrain through the intersections between gender, generation, and domestic sphere. In regards this latter category, the domestic sphere, I have problematized this social space and "moral" economy in the light of a specific feminist tradition and debates related to social capital. The fertilization of these two branches of analysis has stimulated a new reflection on the socioeconomic role and meaning of the mobile phone and mobile communication.

I have argued that it is necessary to move to a new stage of research and analysis, stimulating the shift from a descriptive stage of the studies on mobile telephony to a second stage, a more complex paradigm which negotiates the new forms of labor and capital of postmodernity.[35] In this paper I have highlighted some of the theoretical and methodological limitations that have characterized the thirteen odd years of preliminarily mobile-phone research. In the diffusion of broadband technology and the convergence process that are occurring between Internet, pictures/video/ television, and mobile phones, I believe we are still unprepared to understand how women and the different generations will react to mobile media. What remains apparent is that mobile media will undoubtedly intensify the gender and generational logics already at play. Thus, the challenge remains how women—of different generations—will build important moments of self-determination and self-valorization through the realm of mobile media.

In conclusion, this paper is homage to the efforts of all the women who, during the last decades, have been engaged in understanding and studying women's place and sense of being in the world. Although often lacking in resources, funding, academic positions, and so on, many women, such as all the female scholars I have cited in this chapter, have given a great contribution to understanding the meaning and the functioning of the domestic sphere, as well as the relation between women and technology, and showed that these themes are so crucial not only for women but for all.

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