Școala Națională de Studii Politice și Administrative

Școala Națională de Studii Politice și Administrative

Școala Doctorală Multidisciplinară

Domeniul de Doctorat: Științe Politice

Summary

Claiming Feminist Subjectification: A Political Framework on Objectification and Capabilities

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București 2025

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A Summary

While there is not a single universally agreed-upon definition on objectification, most perspectives share a common starting point: they recognize that the term *object-fication* derives its essence from the word itself which signifies the becoming or making into an object or lose some of the proprieties that defines humanity through imagination, words, or action. Objectification is a contested concept that has generated diverse perspectives, particularly regarding the questions of who has the power to objectify and where objectification takes place. Many feminist theorists have situated objectification within a framework that emphasizes isolated interactions between gendered individuals. While valuable, I consider this perspective to be limited, as it risks overlooking the broader social and political dimensions through which objectification operates. The central themes of this thesis - objectification, understood as the process and phenomenon that reduces women to object-like qualities or treats them as less than subjects, and *subjectification*, understood as the process and phenomenon through which a subject is constituted via agency and recognition—are not merely abstract concepts. They also trace and shape my own experience of becoming a woman and a researcher, and more importantly of becoming a political subject with a developed feminist consciousness. My position throughout this study is based on three main perspectives. First, the *epistemological*: how objectification shapes ways of knowing and thinking about the world, influencing what counts as legitimate knowledge and who is recognized as a knower. Second, the *ontological*: what objectification is and how it functions—for instance, what it means to be an object or a subject, and how concepts such as consent, autonomy, and bodily integrity are constructed and negotiated. Third, the *political normative*: how justice relates to the creation of conditions under which individuals can both be and act—examined through the lens of capabilities and intersubjectivity, and attentive to the ethical and political implications of objectification that hinder human flourishing.

The central aim of this research is to study the complexity of objectification—why it has gained popularity as a term while still lacking adequate conceptual examination, particularly regarding the political implications. Objectification is often treated as a conceptual bridge for understanding a wide range of gendered practices, including sexual harassment, violence against women, the production and circulation of pornographic content, and women's marginal status in political life. As such, objectification serves not merely as a descriptive term, but as an analytic tool that connects these practices to broader structures of power and inequality. In this thesis, I frame objectification as a political issue that demands sustained and rigorous engagement within political theory. My aim is to develop a political theoretical framework capable of orienting and informing future applied research on the subject. I argue that the process and phenomenon of objectification are inherently entangled with—and dependent on—gender. I will at times refer to objectification as a concept, emphasizing its epistemological dimension, while at other times I will describe it as a phenomenon, to highlight its structural and systemic character. I will also use the term process to capture the internal, lived experience of objectification at the individual level. This triadic usage reflects the fact that objectification operates both structurally and subjectively—an interplay that is central to its theoretical complexity.

The foundational definition of this thesis considers objectification both a process and a phenomenon **shaped by desire, perception, and belief** (Langton, 2006). This definition is followed by a theoretical framework aimed at understanding the nuances of objectification as both a lived experience and a political condition. I argue that if objectification shapes desire, perception, and belief, it infringes on the capabilities threshold—a concept used by Martha Nussbaum (2000) to mark the minimum below which a person cannot flourish as a fully human agent—therefore producing social injustice.

My central argument is that the prevailing feminist political paradigm surrounding objectification must shift away from a sole focus on the harms of person-to-object reduction and toward the feminist task of politically constructing and **affirming the subjectification of those historically objectified**. In this sense, objectification should not be perceived merely as individual harm, but can be understood as both a moral and a political harm—a systemic practice that violates the threshold of capabilities and undermines nearly every central capability necessary for a flourishing human life. It denies women inherent dignity by stripping them of the social conditions necessary

to be recognized as full political agents, and it often undermines internal capabilities by distorting self-perception and agency.

To reclaim agency and ensure that dignity is respected, I argue that we need to examine how subjects are formed and be attentive to the ways in which subjectification takes shape. Seeking justice in practices marked by objectification without the tools to challenge them is a difficult task unless it is counterbalanced by recognizing a political subject that is not essentialist, heteronormative, classist, or racist. This new political subject is feminist, fragmentary, embodied, and dynamic. The process of subjectification should be grounded in a feminist ethics in order to be a just subjectifying phenomenon and to achieve structural impact.

The Capabilities Approach thus becomes not just a tool to evaluate well-being, but also a political framework for reclaiming subjectification and rebuilding the foundations of dignity where objectification has eroded them. Therefore, the kind of justice made possible by a capabilitarian reframing of objectification demands political subjectification. If political subjectivity has historically been constructed through masculine norms of autonomy, rationality, and disembodied impartiality, it becomes crucial to ask whether a feminist subject can be imagined and politically enacted.

Research Questions:

- What does a conceptual map of objectification look like?
- How does one become objectified?
- How does objectification unfold as a process and as a phenomenon?
- How is the feminist subject situated within the process of subjectification?
- What is the relationship between objectification and harm?
- Can objectification and subjectification be framed as an issue of gender justice?

Chapter Overview:

The structure of the thesis will unfold in four distinct chapters, each exploring objectification from a different perspective:

In the first chapter I provide a conceptual map of objectification, tracing its diverse theoretical articulations within feminist thought and distinguishing between "soft" and "hard" approaches.

Soft objectification, associated primarily with liberal feminists such as Martha Nussbaum, is examined through her influential typology of objectification's features—including instrumentality, denial of autonomy, fungibility, and denial of subjectivity. While Nussbaum does not view objectification as inherently negative, I argue that her account is incomplete and ultimately inconsistent with the political and moral commitments she later articulates in her capabilities approach. I propose a critical revision of her theory to better align with her normative aspirations. In contrast, hard objectification—aligned more closely with radical feminism—treats objectification as inherently morally wrong. Drawing on Catharine MacKinnon's work, particularly her critique of pornography as a central mechanism of silencing and sexual objectification, I explore how this approach expands the scope of objectification to systemic violations of speech and bodily integrity. The chapter also engages with Sally Haslanger's concept of assumed objectivity, where epistemic ideals themselves may function as mechanisms of objectification; Ann Cahill's theory of derivatization, which reframes objectification as a relational distortion; Linda LeMoncheck's view of objectification as a form of dehumanization; and the phenomenon of self-objectification, in which individuals internalize external perceptions and adopt compensatory strategies for social survival. Through this mapping, Chapter 1 sets the theoretical groundwork for understanding objectification as not only a moral issue but a deeply political one that demands rethinking the liberal model of the autonomous subject.

In chapter two I focus on the conceptual and political tensions between the categories of subject and object, with particular attention to how the gaze—especially the male gaze—structures their relational dynamic. The chapter interrogates the ways in which subjects and objects are not merely ontological states but are constituted through social, linguistic, and visual practices. Drawing on poststructuralist and postmodern feminist theories, I explore how language, power, and discourse work together to produce and reinforce asymmetrical relations between gendered subjects and objects. Special emphasis is placed on the constitutive role of language in subjectification, showing how the very grammar of our speech often presumes or erases the feminine subject. The male gaze emerges here not only as a visual mechanism but also as a broader structuring force that assigns visibility, agency, and intelligibility unequally. I argue that the feminine subject is systematically dislocated within dominant discourses, appearing only through absence or negation. This chapter ultimately offers a critical mapping of subjectification as a process shaped by exclusion and points to the necessity of reconfiguring subject positions in ways that disrupt normative power

hierarchies. It initiates a quest for the formation of a feminist subject capable of challenging power relations structured by language, the gaze, and the gendered dichotomies of object/subject and mind/body that reinforce hierarchical systems.

The third chapter investigates the causal relationship between objectification and harm, situating objectification not as a theoretical abstraction but as a lived, structural consequence of entrenched gender norms and the operation of gender as a system of power. I begin by establishing that objectification is not an isolated interpersonal act but a practice embedded within wider social and political contexts that reproduce inequality. The chapter proceeds by advancing and testing two core assumptions: first, that if A objectifies B, then B suffers harm; and second, that if A harms B, then B is subject to social injustice. On the basis of these premises, I argue that objectification can be understood as a form of social injustice.

To substantiate this claim, I categorize the harms linked to objectification into three distinct but interconnected forms: psychological, physical, and epistemic. Psychological harm is analyzed through the phenomenon of self-objectification, where individuals internalize objectifying norms that diminish their agency and well-being. Physical harm emerges through increased vulnerability to gender-based violence and the normalization of bodily violation. Epistemic harm is examined via Miranda Fricker's framework of epistemic injustice, through which I argue that women are both denied credibility as knowers and reduced to objects of knowledge. Through this multi-dimensional analysis, the chapter demonstrates that objectification is not only harmful but constitutes a pervasive form of gendered injustice with serious moral and political implications.

In the fourth chapter I extend the inquiry from the preceding chapter by turning from critique to reconstruction, seeking to reimagine justice through the lens of the capabilities approach. Building on the claim that objectification constitutes a form of social injustice, the chapter interrogates the limits of contractarianism—particularly as formulated in John Rawls's theory of justice—in addressing gender-based harm. Rawls's Original Position, with its requirement that individuals deliberate behind a Veil of Ignorance, ostensibly guarantees fairness and impartiality. However, by abstracting away from gender and other forms of identity, this model fails to account for the lived realities of systemic objectification. In its attempt to be impartial, Rawls's framework inadvertently obscures structural inequalities, leaving gender-based harms unrecognized and unaddressed. To overcome these limitations, I turn to the capabilities approach, particularly as

articulated by Martha Nussbaum, which centers human dignity, flourishing, and the conditions necessary for individuals to function as agents. I argue that objectification should be reframed as a capability-depriving process—one that obstructs the realization of essential capabilities such as bodily integrity, practical reason, and affiliation. Through this lens, justice requires not only formal equality but also the material and social conditions that enable individuals, especially women, to be recognized and treated as subjects with agency.

This study proposes a feminist ethics of subjectification as the political and moral foundation for justice. Rather than relying on abstract models that erase difference, a capabilities-based framework offers a more inclusive vision of justice that affirms dignity through enabling conditions. Finally, the objectives of this thesis moves toward a theory of justice grounded in the mutual recognition or intersubjectivity and cultivation of a feminist subjectification.