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‘A SUIT, OF HIS OWN EARNING’

Fashion supremacy and sustainable fashion activism

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Thoreau and independence

It is no coincidence that Henry David Thoreau starts off his *Walden* (1992 [1854]) experiments on independence, self-determination and autonomy with a critique of what he sees as people’s everyday relation to fashion, a relation that affects us all, whether we want it or not. Thoreau draws parallels between our obedience to fashion, our submission before fate, and our surrender to power, as we uncritically adhere to the authority of trends:

When I ask for a garment of a particular form, my tailoress tells me gravely, ‘They do not make them so now’, not emphasizing the ‘They’ at all, as if she quoted an authority as impersonal as the Fates [. . .] We worship not the Graces, nor the Parcae, but Fashion. She spins and weaves and cuts with full authority. The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveller’s cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same.

(Thoreau, 1992 [1849/1854]: 16)

For Thoreau, clothes are not unimportant, they are instead remarkable instruments from which to build independence, and they can reveal our relationship to power, fate, fashion or government, if we just take them seriously. Not only are clothes ‘assimilated to ourselves’ (Thoreau, 1992 [1849/1854]: 14), but simple clothing is part of an independent life, ‘where is he so poor that, clad in such a suit, of his own earning, there will not be found wise men to do him reverence?’ (Thoreau, 1992 [1849/1854]: 16; original italics). Following Thoreau, independence starts from the production of our social skin, with a position that questions the fate, or power, of fashion.

For Thoreau, we must govern ourselves by our conscience, and not seek to be ruled, not even democratically. As he notes in his essay *Resistance to Civil Government* (1992 [1849/1954]), ‘Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail’ (Thoreau, 1992 [1849/1854]: 231; original italics). To Thoreau, democracy is only a convenient delegation of power and responsibility to a parliament; thus we acquit ourselves from necessary action for justice.

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Thus, following Thoreau, at the core of independence lies our relation to fashion, as it mirrors our relation to government and power. Obeying fashion consists of the same behaviour as obeying laws not set by ourselves. With a suit of one's own earning, there is, however, a possibility of building independence, justice and responsibility.

**Fashion supremacy**

Being considered unattractive can be a subjective or individual experience between peers, and this is a part of any human life. However, being unattractive can also be part of subjugation under a structural regime of domination, where ideals of beauty and hierarchies of values are weapons of repression and where ideals reinforce submission. Such a system also promotes various forms of indifference and willing blindness to injustice. This type of regime I would like to call fashion supremacy, an aesthetic, political and ontological category, which has become an intrinsic part of today’s social life. It is also ingrained in the collective psyche of consumer society’s dressed and embodied normativity. As in white supremacy, it is a mechanism of what sociologist and civil rights activist W. E. B. du Bois called 'double-consciousness’, which implies that 'of looking at oneself through the eyes of others', producing a derogatory sense of self (Cowan, 2003: 22f). Here, I learn to see myself through the eyes of a system that looks down on me, a system I can neither influence nor escape, and yet it still defines me. Similar to the mechanisms of racism experienced, for example, in the US, where one may live in America, while not feel part of America, a consumer may temporarily feel he or she is in fashion, while also definitely not part of it.

Power may be inherent in almost every social relation, but fashion supremacy is so mendacious today, where cheap consumer goods allow the consumer to feel as if one can change one’s world, or at least oneself, by what one buys and owns. With access to goods, a consumer can, at least temporarily, change social position and access new arenas. Yet, as cultural critic Henry Giroux writes, the role of the agent is still limited to that of consumer, object or billboard (Giroux, 2009: 14). It is never a position of authority, even if it may appear so from the perspective of a self-proclaimed fashion blogger, who still achieves their position by excessive consumption. This tendency amplifies an individualist subjectivity based on commodity competitiveness, where ‘it becomes difficult for young people to imagine a future in which the self becomes more than a self-promoting commodity and a symbol of commodification’ (Giroux, 2009: 17). Similarly, cultural critic Zygmunt Bauman frames the marketplace as the main arena today for a formation of the self, where citizens are ‘simultaneously, promoters of commodities and the commodities they promote’ (Bauman, 2007: 6; original italics).

In the society of consumers, no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity, and no one can keep his or her subjectness secure without perpetually resuscitating, resurrecting and replenishing the capacities expected and required of a sellable commodity.

(Bauman, 2007: 12)

What makes fashion supremacy so deceitful today is the imagination that cheap and accessible fashion is a form of democracy, a system governed by and for the people. This type of consumer democracy is a severe deception of the democratic promise. The democratic promise of change is a social one, based on equal access to influencing power through the vote, whereas the consumerist promise is an individual, private and egocentric one, based on economic assets. The democratic promise of social change tells us we can hold people of power accountable,
change the regime, and we as citizens are part of the ruling order of society. The inherent choices of consumer democracy hold nothing but the promise of individual change of style, and only within the commodity economy. As philosopher Jean Baudrillard notices, ‘Fashion embodies a compromise between need to innovate and the other need to change nothing in the fundamental order’ (Baudrillard, 1981: 51). Nothing in individual consumer choices, as offered to the larger part of the population through fast fashion, can change the order of consumerism itself: ‘no illusion of change is added the illusion of democracy’ (Baudrillard, 1981: 78).

No consumer choice will change the order of power in fashion supremacy. In direct opposition to political democracy, the ‘democratization’ of fashion perpetuates ideals that reinforce submission and indifference to suffering, such as social exclusion, even producing a blunt denial of consumer society’s inequities and injustices. I can consume, as the advertisement says, ‘Because I am worth it’, and those who cannot are simply not worth it.

Fashion consumption is a powerful tool to avoid, sublimate or ignore discomfort, and it resonates well with cultural critic Cornel West’s perspective of Western societies as a hotel civilization, ‘obsessed with comfort, convenience, contentment’ (Cowan, 2003). When you leave the room it is dirty, but, as you come back, it is clean, and you never saw how it happened, as those doing the labour at the hotel are meant to be unseen, quite like the sweatshop workers overseas. As a guest at the hotel, you are shielded from the unjustified suffering of the world, and, in this perfect comfort, there is no need to talk about injustices or inequities, as they are simply not allowed into the lobby. The hotel is a perfect fusion of home and market that makes you feel at home, as long as you have the cash to pay (West in Cowan, 2003: 25).

As fashion consumers, and hotel guests, we become complicit in the mechanisms of injustice, or deeply planted within the hostile terrain of exploitation. This is not only an exploitation happening overseas in hidden sweatshops, but we are enacting the power of fashion every day. The power of fashion is not residing in some buildings in Paris or New York, but is repeated between us every day. The fashion system happily supplies us with the micro-weapons of oppression we use against each other. As British media theorist Nick Couldry says, ‘every system of cruelty requires its own theatre’, drawing on the rituals of everyday life to legitimize its norms, values and social practices (Couldry, 2008: 1). A ‘democratized’ fashion system is such a theatre of cruelty.

**Fashion as everyday fear**

Every fashion is enacted between peers, within the horizontal comradeship of a real or imagined community, and it has its own mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, its icons and leaders, its unwritten ‘rules of the street’. And, just like any other style, it is both a force of empowerment as well as a culture driven and reproduced by systemic reproduction of fear, a social fear of losing popular ground, being ridiculed or isolated. Through fear, the social mechanisms of control are internalized in all of us. As political scientist David Corrigan notes,

> We fear the loss of job security or position; we worry how family, friends, and employers will view us. We are so entangled in the comforts of society that we find it difficult to take risks, even for causes we hold dear.

*(Corrigan, 2009: 33)*

As sketched out by anthropologist James Scott (1990), we overcome fear and domination by our hope of one day having the opportunity to dominate. One can endure domination today, if one will eventually be able to exercise it later, and this gives a strong incentive to emulate
patterns of domination, even if the revenge 'must be exercised on someone other than the original target of resentment' (Scott, 1990: 82). Similarly, by wilfully engaging in these activities, we do not question our compliance. Gossip may be an example of this type of exercise of distributed compliance, reinforcing 'normative standards by invoking them and by teaching anyone who gossips precisely what kinds of conduct are likely to be mocked or despised' (Scott, 1990: 142f).

An example from fashion can be paparazzi photos. They show how ordinary looking the Hollywood stars are when they wake up in the morning, but the photos, at the same time, verify the stars' power over us. Similarly, as the photos show, the stars may not look good all the time, but they sometimes look amazing, and, thus, we come to ask ourselves: why can't I look as good sometimes? (~ 'It must be their commodities, I got to get more of that fancy stuff they have!).

Street fashion photography can be seen as a merger of emancipatory fashion imaging, paparazzi surveillance and politics of individuality. Just like any other technology, street fashion photography can be seen as 'neutral', and yet it is also employing specific 'technologies of self' that distribute power in a certain way. Parallel could be drawn to ultrasonic imaging, which produces a special moral position (Verbeek, 2011), which in turn makes us judge the world accordingly. Street fashion produces the subject as an isolated individual (rather than part of a social community), as an object (rather than agent), as a consumer (rather than producer), and it amplifies visual primacy, setting visual 'style' and the submission to fashion ideals higher than personal skills or capabilities. It makes the visually documented consumption patterns idealized by the fashion industry the everyday mode of subjectification, or what Foucault would call a 'technology of the self', reinforced by a scopic 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1973, 1988). Even if fashion blogging may demonstrate some agency as that of the 'prosumer', or producer-consumer (Toffler, 1980), it is still a position totally within the regime of fashion supremacy, with no means to affect the ruling order, and it even strengthens the domination of fashion supremacy.

Enactment of supremacy: fashion violence and microaggressions

Fashion supremacy makes our peers the 'judges' of our fashionability, referencing our dressed expressions to the latest shared trends. The social comments, of approval or condemnation, are the verdicts of the jury. And no law is upheld without systems of judgment, execution and punishment. In the social world of fashion, punishment takes the form of violence and microaggressions. Our peers are the 'fashion police'.

The violence of fashion is not a physical force or assault, but rather a transgression, humiliation, harassment or a violation of integrity. As political theorist Vittorio Butocchi proposes, also seemingly non-violent acts, such as imprisoning and starving someone to death, are acts of violence (Bufocchi, 2007: 14f). Fashion may not be violent, but it still enforces violence on the social and psychological environment, on social relations and subjects. It reproduces a social sorting and pecking order based on dress. A micro-act of violence conducted through fashion may be wilfully ignoring someone, a degrading comment, or sustained harassment on the basis of clothing. Such micro-acts, or microaggressions, are parts of a larger scheme of culturally, structurally and directly sanctioned violence.

Following the typology of violence from peace researcher Johan Galtung, three levels of violence could be amplified through fashion: 'direct', 'structural' and 'cultural' violence (1990). Cultural violence is the soft power that legitimizes an order that supports the fact of structural violence and the acts of direct violence. Cultural violence makes structural discrimination seem 'natural' and endorses individual acts of direct violence, with the help of mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion, social hierarchies and norms: 'The culture preaches, teaches, admonishes, eggs on,
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...and dulls us into seeing exploitation and/or repression as normal and natural, or into not seeing them (particularly not exploitation) at all' (Galtung, 1990: 295).

In the realm of fashion, cultural violence may make the slim Caucasian model body an explicit standard of beauty, discriminating against other bodies both implicitly and explicitly, and it may even play with this ideal in an 'ironic' way in media, while still perpetuating it (see also Chapter 10). Structural violence may manifest these fashion ideals in sizes and patterns and also produce social or racial sorting mechanisms in the layout of stores or names of sizes. The direct violence may happen in forms of blunt harassment or microaggressions, by a shop attendant, a bouncer at a restaurant or fellow pupils at school.

Microaggressions is a term sprung from psychologist Derald Wing Sue's studies of racism, and they are 'everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages' towards the marginalized (Sue, 2010: 3). Microaggressions are most detrimental when delivered by well-intentioned individuals who are unaware of their harmful conduct.

Because most people experience themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings, conscious awareness of their hidden biases, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviors threatens their self-image. Thus, they may engage in defensive maneuvers to deny their biases, to personally avoid talking about topics such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism, and to discourage others from bringing up such topics. On the one hand, these maneuvers serve to preserve the self-image of oppressors, but on the other, they silence the voices of the oppressed.

(Sue, 2010: 5)

By executing a 'conspiracy of silence', the perpetrators keep their oppression from being acknowledged ("don't be so oversensitive"), maintain their innocence and leave inequities from being challenged. Sue divides microaggressions into microassaults, microslights and microinvalidations, where the last form is perhaps the most insidious and harmful form, because microinvalidations directly attack or deny the experiential realities of socially devalued groups (Sue, 2010: 10). The reality of the powerful is imposed on the less powerful groups, making them judge their experiences through the values and hierarchies of the powerful. Even a flattering compliment can still reflect oppression, as it both confirms the position of the powerful, who is allowed to judge, and it allows the perpetrator to cling to his or her belief in the subject's inferiority (Sue, 2010: 13). The seemingly well-intentioned comment creates an 'attributional ambiguity', a 'motivational uncertainty in that the motives and meanings of a person's actions are unclear and hazy', to which the victim has trouble responding, or ends up in a double bind (Sue, 2010: 17). The comment 'nice shoes' may be a seemingly harmless compliment, but the context may speak the opposite, making the statement clearly derogatory.

Classist microvalidations 'broadly negate or demean the lived experience of poor or working-class people' (Smith and Redington, 2010: 279). The reality of the poor is not worth anything.

Fashion and lifestyle programming spotlights the wardrobe, dinner parties, and daily activities of wealthy people; issues relevant to them and to middle-class individuals, such as the stock market, comprise the entire programming schedules of cable networks. Simultaneously, we are fed images and narratives evoking our sense that anything is possible and that in this winner-take-all society, we have as good chance of taking it all as anyone.

(Smith and Redington, 2010: 279)
Like in Scott’s example earlier of how the marginalized endure domination because of the hope of one day exercising revenge, here, the belief that they will one day ‘make it’ can lead the poor to endure large-scale poverty and nullification, for a glimpse of status through cheap consumer goods, such as the ephemeral glamour of fashion. Simultaneously, the powerful are simply ‘worth it’.

As Sue notes, microaggression happens in the small gestures, usually from our peers, not our outspoken enemies. Enemies are easy to ignore – the opposition is explicit – but the comments and looks among friends are what expose and hurt us the most, and this is what makes fashion supremacy so socially deceitful. In order to challenge fashion supremacy, other values that build courage and self-esteem beyond consumerism need to be embraced and practised (see also Chapter 1). The disarmament of fashion supremacy needs to be a constructive one; as is often noted in non-violent resistance, it needs to work with two hands: one that opposes and one that builds the alternative.

Resistance to fashion supremacy

The power wielded by fashion icons, such as editors of authoritative magazines, is manifested between us because we obey them, not because they have some inherent power. We give them power. Resistance means withdrawing that power, by us withdrawing obedience and fear, while simultaneously creating alternative values and forms of togetherness through fashion.

Yet, as Simmel (1957) and others have noted, we always dress both to assimilate and differentiate, so that even an alternative to fashion will reproduce fashion itself. The tension is part of fashion’s inherent energy, making it a ‘perpetuum mobile’ (Bauman, 2010), possibly enacting similar mechanisms of violence. However, a constructive fashion may have different emphasis, and it can be a dress-practice coming from different moods, skills and positions. Empowerment in fashion can mean self-esteem, courage and confidence based in other personal expressions than buying new clothes in a competitive setting. Building courage is the act of making and believing in one’s skills and value in the act of making. Even if the material outcome may look similar to a commodity, making allows for training the capability of independence and courage, and reflecting on their social characteristics.

One powerful example of constructive resistance could be the Salt March, coordinated by Mohandas Gandhi in 1930, where Satyagraha (or Truth-Force) was manifested through the hands-on production of independent salt. Instead of buying British salt, which was taxed, Gandhi proposed that Indians marched to the Indian Ocean to make their own salt, which existed there in superabundance. This salt would basically be the same salt as the one they bought from the British, but without the tax. Salt without imperialism. It would be independent salt, where every grain of salt was a manifestation of Indian freedom. Although the act itself was very simple and easily reproduced by the participants, Gandhi had developed a very powerful strategic perspective of the simple action, not basing it on a reaction to oppression, but taking a proactive stance. The act was not against British taxed salt, but for independent salt. Thus, the act disarmed some of the violence of opposition. Several components in the action made it a strong statement of proactive resistance:

- The act mobilized participants through simple and palpable means.
- The act was a non-reproduction of domination.
- The act was an exposure of oppression by making something useful, but illegal (salt).
- The act showed how tangible result, however small, can emerge from protest.
- The act showed how resistance, even on a small scale, builds momentum towards self-rule.
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All these components produced a situation where power was displaced from the salt. The salt produced by the Indians themselves was purified from imperialism. Violence was no longer in the salt, but the British had to reconquer it by using force, imprisoning the people who made their own salt. The British had to be reactive.

Similar to Thoreau’s idea of starting autonomy from a suit of one’s own earning, Gandhi also manifested Indian independence through his own, small-scale production of cloth, as it evoked a debate about independence, truthfulness and justice. What Gandhi did, by producing his own cloth (khaadi), was to raise the debate about independence built from self-sufficiency. For Gandhi, a suit of one’s own earning would mean to build autonomy from the ground up, detoxing the everyday, taking one type of cloth-bound supremacy out of our social relationships.

One simple act of proactive resistance can be repair (see also Chapter 26). It is not an act of reactive non-consummation, but it is a proactive act of amplifying emotional attachment to a garment. It displaces some of the garment’s fashion commodity status to instead highlight its role as a companion, a co-traveller through the adventure we call life. The act of care builds self-esteem and independence, and active restoration reframes the object from a subjective position, with new values and skills attached. A social example of repair can be the workshop, Refuge in Restoration, I organized at the Green Gulch Zen centre in Sausalito, California, in 2011. All participants brought a garment that needed repair, but, instead of simply restoring the garment back to its original status, everyone had to cut a small piece of his or her garment that would become a patch for someone else’s garment. Each garment became a vessel for community, as every garment carried a patch from another. A more strategic method can be ‘fashion hacktivism’, which aims at decoding the larger fashion ‘operating system’ in order to produce more open and inviting alternatives, where the user can contribute and also easily learn skills to build a sustained co-authorship and a position of empowered participation (von Busch, 2008). However, if we only look at the outcomes, as most of these initiatives are still centred on garments, we miss the part that displaces fashion supremacy. Just like the Salt March, the outcome may still look (or taste) the same, but the process of acquirement and production makes all the difference in building independence and empowerment.

As designers and activists take on fashion supremacy, it is important to shift the focus from the objects, or commodities, and their meanings, to the strategic and social value of the capabilities produced through the engagements:

- The act makes clothes open and public, creating a counter-system of clothes.
- The act is based on fashion, not some form of anti-fashion (not violent rejection).
- The act is constructive, building values that challenge fashion supremacy.
- The act breaks the pacifying consumerist order of the dominant system.
- The act highlights the social and ethical resistance to fashion supremacy.
- The act mobilizes people to share the experience of empowerment.
- The act uses the garment to produce personal and social consequences, such as new forms of togetherness.

For designers and users, such a manifestation of fashion-ability means building self-esteem by social making. A suit of one’s own earning does not mean to literally make our own clothes, but having the ability to co-produce self-esteem that challenges fashion supremacy. It means to be grounded in political autonomy, in a position of independence beyond the means offered to us through commodity democracy or consumer culture. Fashion-ability means the capability to engage in fashion on one’s own terms, yet in relation to the zeitgeist, displacing fashion supremacy, and doing so from a position of independence and ethical responsibility.
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With the help of engaged designers, we all need to keep on training and generate hope and shared visions that may one day extend to full civic engagement.

In a time of fashion surplus, to mobilize action on fashion self-reliance is not primarily an act of anti-consumerism. It is not a frugal boycott. As cultural critic Raj Patel notes, 'the opposite of consumption isn’t thrift – it’s generosity' (Patel, 2009: 29). Fashion-ability means the capability to act together in generosity, in order to do the right thing.

References


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