

Otto von Busch

School of Design Strategies, Parsons the New School for Design, New York  
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## **Self-reliant fashion: autonomy, capabilities and the “laws of fashion”**

Abstract :

*Today's systems of fashion seem so complex, opaque and unsustainable there is a wide response towards self-reliant fashion, corresponding with the Do-it-yourself, open source and open design developments in the other design disciplines. Yet, a central concern seems unique to the system of fashion; if fashion is simultaneously an ephemeral symbolic system, a trend-dependent industry and a reflection of the collective zeitgeist, how autonomous can one be and still be part of fashion? The paper uses the conceptual toolbox of philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis and economist Amartya Sen to explore the issues of autonomy and heteronomy, as well as the capabilities to create self-reliant fashion, exemplified by “Antiform”, a Leeds-based brand and site of DIY-fashion.*

One of the most striking paradoxes in fashion may be how we try to express individuality by using only ready-made garments or accessories, objects whose meanings are created outside of ourselves and most often mass produced. Indeed, as philosopher Jean Baudrillard points out, it is the condition of superabundance or surplus of clothes and symbols that makes one fashion more desirable and communicative than the other (cf. Baudrillard 1990; 2005: 162).

As many theorists point out, fashion is an assemblage of expressive symbols, items and styles, inscribed into a system of meaning production, and replicated through the fashion “world” or “system” (cf. Barnard 1996, Kawamura 2005). Some theorists have made unsuccessful attempts to refer to clothing as a language, a special dressed vocabulary where a richer wardrobe means a wider amount of words (cf. Lurie 1981). However, fashion does perform some act of communication. It says something. It thus needs peers to decipher it, position it, draw conclusions, and perhaps most important: make judgments. With fashion we are constantly on trial. The “laws” are continuously updated as the times change, just like sociologist Pierre Bourdieu mentions; “Fashion is the latest fashion, the latest difference.” (Bourdieu 1993: 135) This is even more true these days with the “democratization” of fashion, where relatively cheap and accessible fashion has made our wardrobes swell into walk-in-closets and every fashionista blogs or tweets their latest purchases or desires. Thus not only our appearance is on trial, but even our desires.

Being a social phenomenon, fashion can never be totally *autonomous* (Greek; *auto-* “self”, *nomos* “law” - “one who gives oneself their own law”), just like we cannot have our own personal language, since fashion has to be shared to work as communication. Even “anti-fashions”, such as the Punk of the 70s (cf. Hebdige 1979) or contemporary anti-

establishment expressions like Adbusters (cf. Heath & Potter 2005), have their own style and fashions. Fashion as a logic or “law” is thus stuck in-between its rule abiding process of creation as a communication tool and the anarchist will of the wearer to express something personal and unique (but not too unique, then it is too “original” to be fashionable). Paradoxical as it may seem, the struggle for independence and self-reliance as a form of being in relation to fashion is a central part of the phenomenon and we will further on see a contemporary expression of this.

Many sociologists have studied fashion as an institutional “system”, a semantic power structure (cf. Barthes 1983, Bourdieu 1993, Kawamura 2005), modeled after the ideal geometry of the Paris-centered, top-down cathedral of mass dictations. In such architectural model of a system, notions of “trickle-down” or “bubble-up” makes total sense. But fashion is played horizontally, between people on the same level, rather than vertically, “up” or “down” the social hierarchy. We do not dress like our icons to impress our icons, or dress down to communicate with the bums, but to send signals to our friends, enemies, colleagues and social community at our own level, with the same cultural codes and keys.

At the basis of the “law of fashion” lies the human trait of imitation. For French sociologist Gabriel Tarde the social imaginary and organization of society was a result of “imitative rays” that are the acts of imitation, and every human individual is repeated, or as capable of indefinite repetition copying behavior (Tarde 1907). This means that society or human interactions are built on the same type of interactions as for Tarde “society undoubtedly existed before exchange. It began on the day when one man first copied another.” (Tarde 1903: 28) In fact, for Tarde imitation is the absolute foundation of society, existing at the base or street level.

“Without fashion and custom, social quantities would not exist, there would be no values, no money, and, consequently, no science of wealth or finance. (Tarde 1903: 16)

To Tarde, these rays of imitation are created by interactions and communication into series of imitations throughout generations as traditions, as well as immediate lateral expansions alike ephemeral trends. However, this does not mean everything is created top-down, but rather:

“social institutions, laws, ideas, literature, and arts must always, of necessity, spring from the very bottom of a people to slowly germinate and blossom forth like bulbs.

Nothing can ever be created, complete in all its parts, in a nation’s soil” (Tarde 1903: 36)

Following Tarde’s “laws of imitation”, there could thus be some laws of fashion, and these may traditionally have been dictated from Paris. Today however, there is a multitude of magazines and media outlets of fashion, not least on the Internet, and it may be tempting to think of amateur bloggers as a new democratized power-base in the system, as some have even been invited front-row at the big fashion shows. But one can question how much power bloggers actually have, as they are still the ones being invited, not the other way around, and their dependence on advertizing and invitations. Yet the emergence of “social media”, such as facebook, twitter, and fashion specific image-platforms such as lookbook, has redefined how our looks are disseminated and judged. We no longer only show our latest looks to our immediate surroundings, to friends or in public,

but also to our larger extended networks of on-line audiences. Here our peers are the “judges”, referencing our dressed expressions to the latest shared trends, and the comments, retweets and “hypes” are the verdicts of the jury. Some of these may be explicitly edited by filters, but a law to be followed also needs systems of execution and punishment, often in the form of *micro-aggressions*.

Micro-aggressions is a term usually applied in studies of racism as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults” (Sue *et al* 2007), but it can equally be applied to the automatic acts of disregard, mockery and even hostile bullying that often uses fashion and clothes as an excuse for such insults. We may be able to access fashion more ubiquitously today, but we are also quickly judged according to the new standards. Once again, the laws are at work, not necessarily enforced by some authoritarian police but passionately played out between us as a form of social engagement.

To better examine this paradox the Greek philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis’ concepts of autonomy and heteronomy can be put in relation to fashion and its laws or “logic” – the *nomos* for fashion.

### **Autonomy vs Heteronomy**

For Castoriadis our laws (and imagination) is deployed through two mechanisms, the *instituting* ones and through the *instituted* (Castoriadis 1991: 143). We are all born into systems that affect our thinking, imagination and actions. Yet, at the same time, we also reproduce them into the very system that shaped us. As Castoriadis puts it, “Society is the work of the *instituting* imaginary. The individuals are made by the *instituted* society, at the same time as they make and remake it.” (Castoriadis 1991: 145) Autonomous societies are those in which their members are aware of the instituted mechanisms, and are explicitly *self-instituting* their own laws. In contrast, the members of heteronomous societies attribute their imaginaries to some extra-social authority (such as God, tradition, ancestors). From Castoriadis’ perspective, fashion could be seen as a regime of *instituted heteronomy*, it is a law that is being transcendent to society itself, it is instituted outside of our reach. Its basis might lay in the basic human trait of imitation, but it is socially amplified through the *nomos* and the myth of the creative genius or the star, which produces a *closure of signification*, as if it was a “word of God”, beyond discussion or questioning. Ultimately, the role of culture in a democratic society is just this; to create the condition by which we can question the closures of signification and imagination (Castoriadis 1994).

To Castoriadis, *autonomy* is the act of explicit self-institution, which Castoriadis traces back to the emergence of the democratic Greek cities and their intimate connection with the early philosophers, specifically the “citizen-philosopher” Socrates rather than elitist-driven Plato (Castoriadis 1991: 6ff). As Castoriadis highlights, it is the explicit self-reflection that lies is the foundation of democracy,

“The struggle for democracy is the struggle for true self-government. As the aim of self-government is not to accept *external* limits, true self-government entails explicit self-institution, which presupposes, of course, the putting into question of the existing institution—and this, in principle, at any time. The project of collective autonomy

means that the collectivity, which can only exist as instituted, recognizes and recovers its instituting character explicitly, and questions itself and its own activities. In other words, democracy is the regime of (political) self-reflectiveness.” (Castoriadis 1991: 20f)

It is thus not “voting with our dollars” through cheap superabundance, or “everything to everyone” through mass-production that is democracy. Instead, it is the conscious acts of self-determination and self-reflection, where we ask ourselves, on a collective level, “are our laws just” and “are these the laws we want”? To Castoriadis, democracy is the “questioning of the law in and through that actual activity of the community. [...] At that moment *politics* is born; that is to say, freedom is born as socio-historically *effective* freedom.” (Castoriadis 1991: 164)

The emergence of an autonomous fashion, or a process of shaping a true “democratic fashion” would thus require processes that questions and eventually breaks the *closure of signification* that is the established fashion, or the “dictations”, not only at the individual level, as a free or “original” subject, but as an inter-subjective act. To once again quote Castoriadis,

“Democracy is the project of breaking the closure at the collective level. Philosophy, creating self-reflective subjectivity, is the project of breaking the closure at a level of thought [...] Thus, the birth of philosophy is not just coincident, but equisignificant with the birth of democracy. Both are expressions and central embodiments, of the project of autonomy.” (Castoriadis 1991: 21)

A democratization of fashion would thus, following the ideas of Castoriadis, require another mindset than the dominant logic of commodity-based imitation in fashion, and also, perhaps more importantly, a questioning of the micro-aggressions of everyday fashion judgements on a collective level. For fashion to become a phenomenon beyond the “dictations” of the current trends and their interpreters, designers, editors and producers, an *effective freedom* in fashion needs a new mode of self-reflectiveness rather than cheap mass-produced goods, however accessible or “democratic” they may be.

### **Autonomy of Commodities vs Capabilities**

If we are to examine the *effective freedom* in fashion we may have to look beyond the traditional object of design; the commodity or garment to instead examine self-reliant fashion from an angle which includes the (external and internal) capabilities for autonomy. For such approach, the “capabilities approach” of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen can be of help.

One of Sen’s fundamental critiques to our everyday perspective on societal development is that we are too focussed on economic growth and the measuring of this development through our access to commodities (Sen 1985). This is also common in fashion, as we usually conceive that owning the fashionable garment immediately transfers its characteristics onto us, making us fashionable. But as Sen argues, possessing a commodity does not mean one knows how to use it:

Commodities are seen in terms of their characteristics. The characteristics are various desirable properties of the commodities in question. Securing amounts of these commodities gives the person command over the corresponding characteristics. ... However, the characteristics of the goods do not tell us what the person will be able to do with those properties. ... In judging the well-being of the person, it would be premature to limit the analysis to the characteristics of goods possessed. (1985: 9)

Sen argues that we need to shift focus from the commodities, or the inherent characteristics of these objects, to instead look at “what the person succeeds in *doing* with the commodities and characteristics at his or her command” (1985: 10).

To Sen, capabilities should be understood as *what a person is able to do and be*. Sen further differentiates between internal and external capabilities, that is, our inner abilities and our opportunities to can enact them in the world. As Sen’s collaborator, philosopher Martha Nussbaum puts it, capabilities “are not just abilities residing inside a person but also freedoms and opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment” (2011: 20). Similar to the ideas of Castoriadis, to have the capabilities to be an autonomous individual thus means interdependence on the surrounding environment, and vice versa. Our internal capabilities do not grow in a social vacuum, they are

trained or developed traits and abilities, developed, in most cases, in interaction with the social, economic, familial, and political environment. [...] A society might be quite well as producing internal capabilities but might cut off the avenues through which people actually have the opportunity to function in accordance with those capabilities. (2011: 21)

The *ability* to engage in fashion could thus be something beyond the mere engagement in the commodity economy through cheap commodities. Indeed, a fashion-ability would mean a more self-reflective and socially engaged participation in the fashion ecology, beyond the mere act of choosing one garment over the other, but choice at a greater scale. As Nussbaum put it: “The notion of *freedom to choose* is thus built into the notion of capability. [...] To promote capabilities is to promote areas of freedom” (2011: 25). Thus one strategy towards a fashion bound for self-reliance beyond commodities has to engage other capabilities than the monetary-based access to commodities, and one such attempt can be found in the Leeds-based brand “Antiform”.

### **Self-reliant fashion as autonomy beyond commodities**

“Antiform” is a project and enterprise by fashion designer Lizzie Harrison after starting her first collaborative store in Leeds in 2005 and parallel to her fashion studies. At the time, she started a store called “1/25” with 24 other local makers, sharing the rent and the commitments of running the store (each paying 1/25<sup>th</sup> of the rent and working a day a month). Her initiative, common among new start-ups, stemmed from the lack of possibilities for fresh designers to get their idea out on the market (Harrison 2012). In 2008 she created “ReMade in Leeds”, an initiative of clothes recycling and redesign, where a central component was the relocalization of labour and production to a neighbourhood

level, eventually coming to source material and labour within the are of one post-code in Leeds. “Antiform” and “ReMade in Leeds” today run parallel as Harrison’s brands, emerging from these early experiences of self-reliance, and they still aim at the core values of localization and community-based co-production. A central skill-set Harrison emphasises in her design is the ability to “curate the textiles opportunities that appear”, and especially to shape designs as “a direct reference to the local textiles mills whose waste we use” (Harrison 2012). The business and its core values have “grown out of the principles of self-reliance” and she explains further;

ReMade in Leeds is very much tailored to the local area is the aim is to create sustainable fashion solutions for everyday people. We aim to create opportunities for people on a low income to be more sustainable and engage in fashion. Leeds has a very rich textiles and fashion history yet there is very little independent fashion here so it is important for us to create events etc. (Harrison 2012)

Shaping a local arena for self-reliant fashion is thus not only a question of production (which has been there for a long time, but mainly focused on export), but the formation of a local scene, a *self-instituting scene for fashion*, with events and workshops, shows and parties. Harrison takes a specific perspective on bottom-up co-creation as a way to “create a rich network of interlinking businesses sharing a local creative economy” (Harrison 2012), thus spreading initiative and support functions across the bottom among local businesses.

Harrison’s initiative is not an isolated site of this kind of ideas. The now defunct Paris-based sewing café “Sweatshop” ran between 2010-12 and eventually came to be hosted at the upmarket store Selfridges in London, and releasing a book (Duss & Holleis 2011). Another famous example can be the London-based shop Junky Styling, also realeasing their methods as recipes for user-engagement in fashion(Sanders & Seager 2009). But these initiatives has been an essential part of fashion for many decades, not the least known from Malcolm McLaren’s and Vivienne Westwood’s shop “Sex” in the end of the 70’s in London. Yet a capabilities approach of Sen and Nussbaum can shed some new light on this phenomenon; the freedom and capability *to do and be something*, thus reverberates with a self-instituting approach to fashion. Such initiatives, as mentioned above, means taking the fashion-abilities as a focal point for engaged civic action, co-creating opportunities for autonomy.

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