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Fashion and Politics

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Political Fashion

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Fashionable Politics

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LBRIS **Can Fashion Be Defended?**

Djurdja Bartlett

Fashionable objects are often dismissed as fetishistic commodities. And yet fashion is an embodied everyday practice, endowed with the capacity to bring pleasure, incite and transmit affect, as well as disturb authoritarian tendencies. These performative aspects of fashion are habitually ignored by the moral and gendered politics of consumption. While this essay does not question the role of fashion in capitalism, it does explore its performative power, both on a collective and individual level.

Fashion is a crucial element of modernity: its spread worldwide has been tied up with the controversial advance of western capitalism in all its expressions, including the economic and cultural subjugation of less developed regions and brutal colonial conquests. Yet, while accompanying the global march of capitalism, fashion has mapped the uneven progress of modernity, thus highlighting – and often resisting – the totalitarian, nationalistic and extreme religious spaces on the world map.

Thus fashion played a role in the national awakenings of mid-nineteenth-century Europe, and posed challenges to the authorities in interwar China, in socialist countries during the Cold War, and, more recently, in Iran and Poland. While such acts of performing national and individual identities are certainly complicit with commodity culture, they nevertheless show that sartorial performance enables the cultural re-articulation of new and old hegemonies. Precisely due to its universal, cosmopolitan appeal, fashion has facilitated, historically and today, new subjectivities as well as new looks. A critique of commodification does not take into account these complex social and personal relationships between the subject and her or his objects. In contrast to Marx's strictly economic analysis of the commodity, recent analyses suggest that affective value is always embedded in the commodity, ready to be activated and sustained by those who buy it. Contemporary transnational fashion is not only a complex economic enterprise, but also an emotionally charged phenomenon. The advanced spaces of digital transmission and exchange are inhabited by ghosts of the past, from the socialist to the colonial. Yet, endowed with political agency, and saturated with genuine pain, these spectres might help address old injustices, perhaps bringing change, not only in fashion but also in the wider world.

In this sense, the essay argues, through a range of historical and contemporary case studies, that fashion should not be dismissed but instead observed as an important social, cultural and political phenomenon. Its complicity with the global dispersion of commodity culture should not prevent us from investigating, and living, fashion as a site of shared pleasure which, in contrast to the divisive politics of the day, does not divide us along the lines of nation, race, sex and gender.

FIG. 3
Elisabeth von Österreich
Ungarn, Empress of Austria
and Queen of Hungary, 1867
Photographer Emil Rabending

Historically and today, fashion can be defended if we are to escape the interpretations that exclusively embed it in the framework of the commodification culture, as well as those that dismiss it as an ephemeral phenomenon.

The National

On 3 March 1864, the most distinguished French intellectuals and politicians attended a grand masked ball organised by the historian Jules Michelet in Paris. Although such balls are customary during Lent, this one, shrewdly mixing pleasure, dress and politics, was unique. Michelet and his wife Athénaïs, both fervent Republicans, asked their guests to mask themselves either as historical figures or nations, encouraging them to don the dress of the oppressed. Well known for exploring history by focusing on the people, and not solely its leaders or institutions, Michelet engaged the liberal-minded members of the French elite in political debates at his regular Thursday salon. On this special occasion, the guests gladly stretched their politics into the field of dress, and with France, indeed Europe, in social and political turmoil, inspiration was close by. In his diary Michelet wrote that 100 guests attended, and that the oppressed nations staged at the masquerade included Czech, Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Serbian, Venetian and Vlach.¹ The brothers Goncourt, who were among the attendees, prophetically observed that they 'seemed to watch dancing future revolutions in Europe'.²

For Michelet, this was not about entertainment. Bitterly regretting the failed 1848 bourgeois revolutions, the host and most of his guests took their liberal, antimonarchist beliefs seriously.³ Under the masks of the oppressed nations, they dreamed of new political ruptures, resulting in successful bourgeois revolutions, not only in France, but also in a much wider geopolitical area, which, at the time, was under the control of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires.

Only three years after Michelet's ball, Elisabeth, Empress of Austria, known as Sissy, acknowledged as one of the most beautiful and stylish women of her era, performed her own political masquerade on the public stage. When she was crowned Queen of Hungary in 1867 she showed her presumed political sympathies towards the Hungarians with her choice of outfit, which was modelled on the Hungarian national gala costume: a white, richly embroidered dress with white lace apron, and black velvet bodice laced with heavy strings of pearls (fig. 3). The magnificence of the dress, which she commissioned from the Parisian House of Worth,⁴ as well as its amalgamation of western elegance and domestic ethnic motifs, were meant to reassure Hungarians that they would be equal with Austria in the new dual monarchy. The highly fashion-literate Empress of Austria demonstrated impeccably that dress is about performing national as well as individual identities.

Dress and the new nation states

Such sartorial expertise was much needed. From the time of the 1848 revolutions, the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires had been in turmoil, and dress

played a crucial role in the processes of social and cultural modernisation, national awakening, dismantling of the three empires and establishing of the new European states following the end of the First World War. Whichever empire they lived under, various ethnicities wanted to free themselves from their oppressive rulers. They dreamed of establishing their own sovereign states, which would be organised around a concept of one nation. In order to put into practice the idea of the nation state, the emerging politics of national representation relied on common characteristics, such as language and history, but also needed strong visual statements to engage potential followers in the process of national awakening. In the second half of the nineteenth century, western fashion was vigorously rejected, and the search for new national dresses started in earnest.

Existing ethnic dress represented a myriad of cut, colour and adornment differences. Indeed, the geopolitics of dress demonstrates that there are no 'national dresses', but rather only local or regional dress. To confine them within political boundaries is an ideologised practice.⁵ In order to unite all citizens of a new nation state under one banner, and to raise a new dress above all sartorial differences, ethnic quotations became geographically vague, amalgamating specific regional differences into an imaginary national dress.⁶

Once established, the concept of national dress, embellished with ethnic motifs, informed the concept of nationhood and national identity in Russia, Eastern Europe and Eastern Central Europe. Fashion magazines such as the Hungarian *Geranium* (*Muskátli*),

founded in 1931, had an important role in promoting the nation state through the use of domestic ethnic motifs in dress and interiors, complementing Hungarian nationalist politics, itself very much mourning the country's lost territory and influence following the end of the First World War. Equally, the most prominent Hungarian designer in the interwar years, Klára Tüdös, fused a nationalist political agenda and elitist fashion in her Budapest haute couture salon Ribbon (*Pantlika*). She started her career as a costume designer for the Hungarian Royal Opera in Budapest, and, subsequently, her fashion relied on flamboyant interpretations of a glorious Hungarian past. The aesthetic culminated in 1938 at a gala event held at the Opera House, where, at the invitation of Magdolna Purgly de Józszáshely, the wife of the Hungarian Regent Miklós Horthy, the aristocratic female guests wore luxuriously embroidered evening outfits based on Hungarian gala dresses, all designed by Tüdös and other domestic salons (fig. 4).⁷ Once more, circumstances outside fashion, in this case Horthy's right-wing politics, informed the perception and application of ethnic motifs.⁸

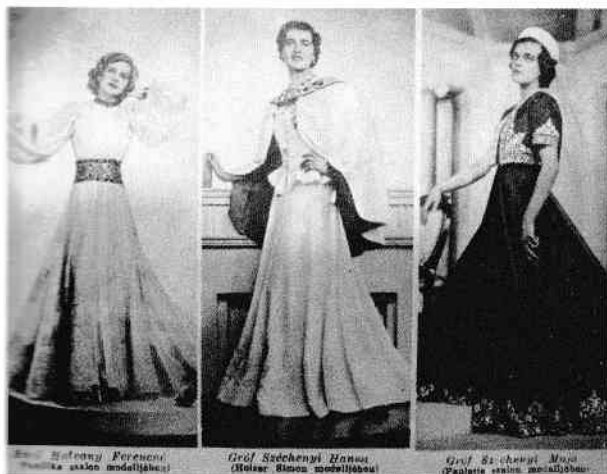
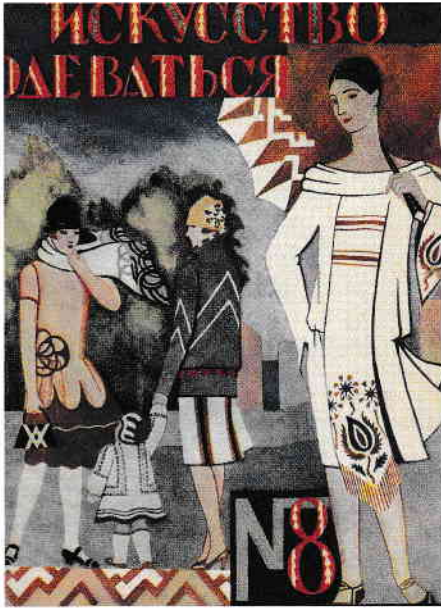


FIG. 4
'The Hungarian Opera Ball',
Theatre Life (*Színházi élet*),
no. 16, 1938



In the field of socialist fashion in the Soviet Union and the countries of the so-called Eastern bloc, the ethnic was also an ideologically informed quotation. As early as the 1920s, the Bolsheviks frowned on western fashion and its Art Deco opulence, and chose the ethnic as the least confrontational type of embellishment (fig. 5). Decorative but not fashionable, vernacular but purified to abstract lines, ethnic motifs were useful tools in the international promotion of the new socialist state as a modernist, yet visually unique project. Later, such timeless decoration perfectly suited Stalinist isolationism and its idea of uniqueness (fig. 6). Change became an ontological obstacle for the post-1920s system, organised around five-year plans and hierarchical levels of decision-making, as, in contrast to western fluidity and rapid change, the epic socialist master narrative expressed itself through the slow movement of time.⁹

Negotiating hegemonies

In contrast, from the late 1950s, socialist women's interest in fashionable dress took place in a parallel modernity, informed by a faster and more fragmented conception of time, and was performed through a range of minor practices such as home dressmaking, using the services of a dressmaker and purchases made on the black market, all discreetly approved by the consecutive regimes. Ephemeral, temporal, dispersed and rooted in the everyday, the practice of fashionable dress under socialism matched Michel de Certeau's definition of tactics. In contrast to strategies that seek to conquer visible and well-defined space, and master time and knowledge, in order to exercise their power, tactics are 'an art of the weak',

FIG. 5
Fashion drawing, *Art of Dressing (Iskusstvo odevatsiia)*, no. 8, 1928

FIG. 6
Ethnic motifs, *Soviet Woman (Sovetskaiia zhenschina)*, no. 4, 1946



their conception of space and time dispersed.¹⁰ Fashion tactics introduced the political into socialist everyday life, a performing device enabling women to negotiate official strategies.

Fashionable dress universally signalled the arrival of modernity – and thus capitalism itself – from the mid-nineteenth century onward, yet its progress took place within the geographically uneven processes of industrial modernisation, colonial conquests, nation building, and media and market development. In this sense, Fredric Jameson's claim that there are not alternate and multiple modernities, such as 'a Latin-American kind, or an Indian kind or an African kind ... [as] ... this is to overlook the other fundamental meaning of modernity which is that of a worldwide capitalism itself',¹¹ is ultimately true, but too rigid. Fashion accompanies capitalism and its market economy on its global march, but its uneven advance highlights the totalitarian, nationalistic and extreme religious spaces on the global map, and threatens those powerful local players who prefer the status quo and fear change. While the global advance of western-informed modernity has been controversial in many ways, fashion has nonetheless functioned as a performative tool in opposing the autocratic and nationalistic regimes that have attempted to subjugate women through mandatory dress codes, or to discipline them by disapproving of fashion.

For example, in interwar China the fashionable *qipao* – a dress of simple cut with a high, side-closing collar, whose silhouette reflected contemporary western fashion (fig. 7) – became the ultimate nationalist sartorial statement when it was embraced by Soong May-ling, wife of the fervently nationalist Chiang Kai-shek. When, in 1934, Chiang Kai-shek launched the New Life Movement, a revival of traditional Confucian values, the *qipao*, with its revealing side slits and distinctly feminine textile patterns, was no longer ideologically acceptable. As the Movement's public face, Soong May-ling covered her refined *qipao* with a long military coat. And yet, in the booming mass culture of the mid-1930s, women's sartorial choices could not be ideologically imposed. For them, there was no way back to the traditional concept of submissive femininity. A long, curvy *qipao* was a self-assured statement, serving to show that women were becoming strong by engaging in sport, and glamorous by mimicking the stars of the latest films.

More recently, in Iran in 2018, some women opposed the hijab as compulsory dress by performing the staged ritual of removing their veils in public.¹² Perhaps even more challenging to the present regime and its ultra-conservative values is the visibility of western fashion brands on the streets of Tehran, where young women are openly dressed in the latest western fashions, their heads barely

FIG. 7
Qipao, The Young Companion
(*Liangyou*), cover, no. 99, 1934

covered. If such acts of performing identity are complicit with commodity culture, and ultimately may not alter imbalances of power in gender relations, they show that fashion is capable of rearticulating hegemonies.¹³ In very different cultural and geopolitical circumstances, women have negotiated their position, drawing on fashion's cosmopolitanism to disturb nationalist, conservative and religious narratives.

Fashion versus nationalism

These social categories still interact, and inform each other in ever new, but still uneven and contradictory ways. During the Cold War, the West was only too happy to criticise the boring style of socialist fashion. But this aesthetic has acquired new connotations in post-socialist times, and the previously dull has become a new cool, at least for some. The cover of the first issue of Polish *Vogue* (March 2018), shot by Juergen Teller outside Warsaw's Stalinist-era Palace of Culture and Science, caused mixed reactions within the country (fig. 8). Anja Rubik and Matgosia Bela – both of Polish origin and internationally well-known models – pose in minimalist Celine black coats by a mighty black Volga, the pride of the Soviet car industry. The likely inspiration for this image was a cover of the weekly magazine *Friendship (Przyjaźń)* from March 1960, in which the model is similarly depicted against the Palace of Culture, reclining on a black Volga. With her big hair, a conventional black-skirted suit, white gloves and white high-heeled shoes, she embodies socialist fashion chic at its best.

The iconography of the Polish *Vogue* cover shows Teller's rough and dark aesthetic, his willingness to challenge prevailing values and assumptions. In line with his other work, this cover is disturbing and provoking. One Polish commentator responded: 'Nothing there is ours, not the palace, not the car, not anything.'¹⁴ Analysing the domestic reactions to this cover, Agata Pyzik and Michał Murawski observed 'a combination of hurt aesthetic feelings and wounded national pride', and stated that 'most Poles would rather have something along the lines of *Vanity Fair*: photoshopped, heavy on bling and celebrity', instead of such a strong visual reminder of their socialist past.¹⁵

Mario Testino's cover for the first issue of Russian *Vogue* (September 1998) and his accompanying editorial depict the latest western fashions against a backdrop of Moscow's stereotypical, tourist destinations.¹⁶ It was meant for the New Russians, whom Condé Nast had detected as customers of the leading western fashion brands. Condé Nast made a different decision by choosing Juergen Teller to shoot its first Polish *Vogue* cover. The subject of Teller's cover is not the models, but the most controversial building in Warsaw, Stalin's 1955 'present' to the Polish nation. Inside the magazine, he has Rubik posing in a Versace evening dress against a pile of potatoes on a decayed parquet floor of the Palace. In another, she operates an industrial vacuum cleaner in its vast neoclassical hall, dressed in a long, equally special, Louis Vuitton gown. By interspersing his fashion editorial with portraits of

FIG. 8
First issue of Polish *Vogue*,
cover, March 2018
Photographer Juergen Teller

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