

BLOOMSBURY  
REVELATIONS



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THE LANGUAGE  
OF FASHION

BLOOMSBURY

# **Chapter 9**

## **Fashion and the Social Sciences<sup>1</sup>**

Fashion consists of imitating that which has first shown itself as inimitable. This mechanism, paradoxical at first glance, is all the more interesting to sociology in that this discipline is principally concerned with modern, technical, industrial societies and fashion is a phenomenon which historically is particular to these societies. It must be pointed out that there are peoples and societies without fashion, for example ancient Chinese society, where clothing was strictly coded in an almost immutable way. The absence of fashion corresponded to the totally stagnant nature of society.

For civilizations without writing, fashion poses a very interesting problem, though this has hardly been studied. This problem belongs to the sociology of cultural exchange: in countries like those in the new Africa, traditional, indigenous clothing, clothing that is unchanging and not subject to fashion, comes up against the phenomenon of fashion originating in the West. This results in compromises, especially for women's clothing. The major 'patterns', models and forms of indigenous clothing are often maintained either in the shape and the form of the clothing or in the types of colours and designs employed; but the clothing is subject to the fashion rhythms of the West, that is to an annual production of fashion and to a renewal of detail. What is interesting in this occurrence is the meeting of a vestimentary civilization not based on fashion with the phenomenon of fashion. It seems that we could conclude that fashion is not linked to such and such a particular

form of clothing but rather is exclusively a question of rhythm, a question of rate in time.

Fashion poses a more acute and more paradoxical problematic to historians than it does to sociologists. The sort of public opinion maintained and promoted by the press and its letters pages etc. presents fashion as an essentially capricious phenomenon, based on the creative faculty of the designer. According to public opinion, fashion is still located within a mythology of unfettered creativity that enables it to evade both the systematic and the habitual, resting upon a rather romantic notion of an inexhaustible abundance of spontaneous creativity. Isn't it said that fashion designers can do anything with nothing?

Historians, or to be more accurate, ethnologists have studied this creative aspect of fashion. The well-known American ethnologist Kroeber made a rich and in-depth study of women's evening dress in the West, stretching back about three centuries and using reproductions of engravings. Having adjusted the dimensions of these plates due to their diverse origins, he was able to analyse the constant elements in fashion features and to come up with a study that was neither intuitive nor approximate, but precise, mathematical and statistical. He reduced women's clothing to a certain number of features: length and size of the skirt, size and depth of the neckline, height of the waistline.<sup>2</sup> He demonstrated unambiguously that fashion is a profoundly regular phenomenon which is not located at the level of annual variations but on the scale of history. For practically 300 years, women's dress was subject to a very precise periodic oscillation: forms reach the furthest point in their variations every fifty years. If, at any one moment, skirts are at their longest, fifty years later they will be at their shortest; thus skirts become long again fifty years after being short and a hundred years after being long.

Kroeber also showed regular connections between, for example, the variations in the length of the skirt and the width of the neckline; certain features are linked in the rhythm of fashion.

The historian is presented here with a fascinating problem, namely that of a particular cultural system which appears to escape all historical determinants. So the West has seen, in 300 years, many changes of regime, many evolutions and many ideological, sentimental and religious upheavals; and yet none of these important historical events has had any effect on the content or even on the rhythms of fashion. The French Revolution did not really fundamentally change this rhythm. No one in

their right mind can establish the slightest link between a high waistline and the Consulate; the most one can say is that major historical events can speed up or slow down the absolutely regular returns of certain fashions.

Men's clothing has a slightly different history from that of women's clothing. Contemporary Western men's clothing was constituted in its general form (*basic pattern*) at the start of the nineteenth century and was influenced by two factors. The first is a formal factor coming from England: men's clothing originates in the Quaker outfit (tight, buttoned jacket, in neutral colours). The second factor is an ideological one. The democratization of society led to the promotion of the values of work over idleness, and developed in men an ideology of self-respect, originating with the English. In the Anglomania at the end of the eighteenth century, self-control found itself incarnated in France in the archetypically austere, constrained and closed nature of male clothing. This clothing ensured that class differences were not visible.

Prior to this, societies had clothing which was completely coded, with any difference depending on whether one belonged to the aristocracy, to the bourgeoisie or to the world of the peasant. As part of the democratization process, the many types of male apparel disappeared, leaving one type of clothing. But just as the suppression of social classes at the start of the nineteenth century was illusory (for these classes continued to exist), so men belonging to the upper classes were obliged, so as to distinguish themselves from the masses, to vary the detail on their outfits, since they were no longer able to change their form. They elaborated this new notion, which was not at all democratic, and called it *distinction*—the word is suitably ambiguous. It was a question of distinguishing oneself in social terms; by distinguishing oneself socially, one was, one is, 'distinguished'. From this we get dandyism: the extremely refined choice of details. A man in the nineteenth century, no longer able to modify the form of his jacket, would distinguish himself from the common man by the manner in which he tied his cravat or wore his gloves...

Since then men's clothing has not really undergone any major changes. But today, a new phenomenon can be seen evolving: the growth of a truly young person's clothing. Up until now, the young person, even the child, did not wear any outfits specific to them: children

were dressed like adults, but using smaller models. Then we saw the appearance of clothing for children, followed by a fashion for young people. This latter is becoming an imperative, imperialist even; to the extent that we must now study men's fashion in terms of adolescent fashion.

In this domain there are micro-sociological phenomena, micro-fashions; these change about every two years. There used to be blue jeans, black jacket, leather jacket; now we have the *Rockers* fashion: tight jacket like that worn by Alfred de Musset, very long hair... This masculine fashion can be found only in young people, juniors.

Clothing—I am not talking about fashion—knows three timescales, three rhythms, three histories.

One of the discoveries of contemporary historical science has been to show that historical time cannot be conceived of as linear and unique because history is made up of a number of timescales of different lengths which lie over each other. There are absolutely specific events; there are *situations* of longer duration called *conjunctures*; and finally there are *structures* which last even longer.

Clothing is affected by all three of these timescales. The longest covers the archetypal forms of clothing in a given civilization. For centuries and within a specific geographical area, oriental men wore, and still wear in part, a dress; in Japan it is the kimono, in Mexico the poncho, etc. This is the *basic pattern*, the basic model for a civilization. Within this timescale moderate but perfectly regular variations take place.<sup>3</sup> The third timescale in short could be called the time of micro-fashions. We can see this in our Western civilization today when fashion changes every year. In fact, these annual variations interest the press and commerce more than they actually affect the general model. We are subjected to a kind of optical illusion which makes us attribute great importance to the annual variation in forms whereas in fact, in historical terms, these variations are merely part of larger, regular rhythms.

There may be a problem one day if the perfectly regular half-century rhythm of fashion were to change. A dress would then normally reach its shortest length in ten or twenty years, then pass through the apparent return of the long dress, and then the cycle would start again with the long dress passing through the apparent return of the short one. We might think that, if this rhythm were shaken up, skirts would probably remain short. It would be interesting to study this phenomenon and

link a shake-up of the rhythm to something happening in the history of contemporary civilization . . .

If Kroeber's rhythm were disrupted, it might be due to the growth and globalization of culture, of clothing, of food and by a kind of equalization of cultural objects, of a jostling together that is so intense that the fashion rhythm would be changed. A new history of fashion will begin.

Changes in rhythm belong to no one. The expression 'a fashion has come from America' is very ambiguous as it is true and false at the same time. Change, supposedly brought about by a fashion, has no origin: it is in the formal law which governs the human mind and in the rotations of these forms in the world. However the origins of the content of fashion can indeed be located, that is the borrowing of a form or a detail which exist already, such as the hairstyle of an actor or an actress, or the way of wearing a dress. Emerging from this question of origins is the notion of mastering fashion, but this very complicated subject is secondary and does not directly interest sociology.

Some people want sociologists to say that the men's fashion for long hair comes from the Beatles; this is correct, but it would be wrong to construct the personality of today's young man in this way and to induce that there is a feminization, or a laziness, of character taking place because of long hair. If hair has become long, it is because it was short before. I am summarizing (and in a rather brusque fashion) my ideas here because I subscribe to a formalist interpretation of the fashion phenomenon. It seems a bit misleading to stuff a phenomenon full of apparently natural contents, none of which are anything of the sort. People who write on the subject of clothing are always tempted to make these psychological links. To consider variations as part of a feminization of clothing seems illusory to me. There is no feature of clothing which is naturally feminine; all there is is a rotation, regular turn-arounds of forms.

What is at stake in clothing is a particular meaning of the body, of the person. Hegel was already saying that clothes made the body meaningful and that therefore they allowed the move to be made from simple feeling to meaning. Psychoanalysts too have concerned themselves with the meaning of clothes. Flügel, using Freudian categories, has analysed clothing,<sup>4</sup> and shown that dressing functioned for Man as a kind of neurosis; since it simultaneously both hides and advertises the body in exactly the same way that neurosis hides and reveals what a person

does not want to say by exhibiting symptoms and symbols. Clothing would in some way be analogous to the phenomenon that reveals our feelings when we blush; our face turns red, we hide our embarrassment at the very moment when we are advertising it.

Clothing concerns all of the human person, all the body, all the relationships of Man to body as well as the relationships of the body to society, which explains why great writers have often been preoccupied by dressing in their works. We can find beautiful pages on this subject in Balzac, Baudelaire, Edgar Poe, Michelet, Proust; they all realized that clothing was an element which involved, as it were, the whole of being.

Sartre treats this question from a philosophical point of view when he shows that clothing allows Man to 'assume his freedom', to constitute himself as he chooses, even if what he has chosen to be represents what others have chosen for him: society made Genet into a thief, and so Genet chooses to be a thief. Clothing is very close to this phenomenon; it seems that it has interested writers and philosophers because of its links with personality, of its capacity to change one's being for another; personality makes fashion; it makes clothing; but inversely, clothing makes personality. There is certainly a dialectic between these two elements. The final answer depends on our own personal philosophy.

In the eighteenth century many books were written on clothing. They were descriptive works but were based explicitly, and very consciously, on the *coding* of clothes, that is on the link between certain types of dressing with certain professions, with certain social classes, certain towns and certain regions. Clothing was perceived as a kind of language, as a kind of grammar: the clothes code. So we can see that clothing is part of that very busy activity in which every object is given a meaning. For all time, clothing has been the object of codification.

This brings us to revise a traditional point of view that at first glance seems reasonable and which maintained that Man invented clothing for three reasons: as protection against harsh weather, out of modesty for hiding nudity and for ornamentation to get noticed. This is all true. But we must add another function, which seems to me to be more important: the function of meaning. Man has dressed himself in order to carry out a signifying activity. The wearing of an item of clothing is fundamentally an act of meaning that goes beyond modesty, ornamentation and

protection. It is an act of signification and therefore a profoundly social act right at the very heart of the dialectic of society.

## Notes

- 1 Interview published in *Echanges*, Assumption 1966; *Oeuvres complètes* vol. 2, 121–5.
- 2 Kroeber and Richardson, *Three Centuries of Women's Fashion*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1940.
- 3 Those variations observed by Kroeber and Richardson.
- 4 Flügel, *Psychology of Clothes*, London, Hogarth, 1950.