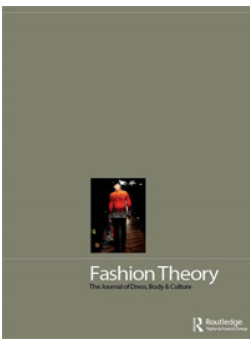


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Fashion and Politics

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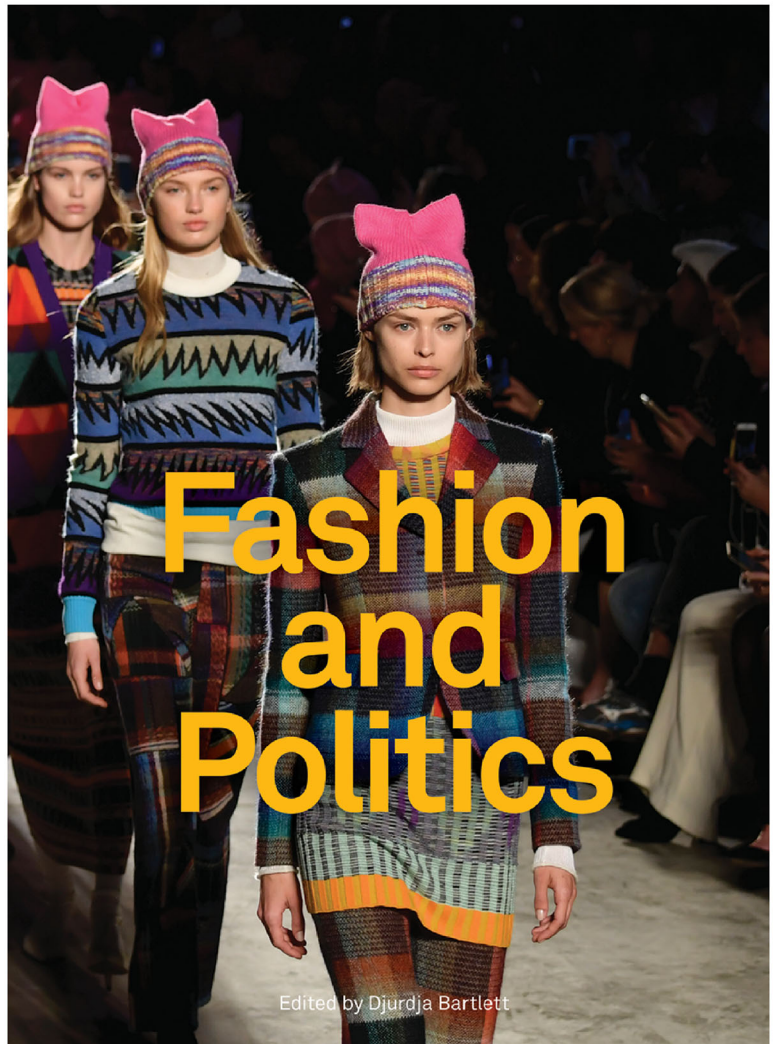
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***Fashion and Politics*, edited by Djurdja Bartlett (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019)**

In a global political climate characterized by unrest, the rise of populism, nationalism and xenophobia, Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the George Floyd's killing, environmental concerns and statements on feminism, we are witnessing an unprecedented awakening of fashion's political consciousness. From pro-immigration messages aired by fashion designers to the incident caused by SportsBanger's "Fuck Boris" T-shirt, from the current Polish opposition party's colorful outfits in support of Poland's LGBTQ+ community to the pink Pussyhats as

Figure 1

Bartlett, Djurdja, ed. 2019, *Fashion and Politics*. eNew Haven and London: Yale University Press, cover.



aglobal symbol of female solidarity in protest against Trump administration, from recent debates about racial and ethnic diversity in fashion to the “performative allyship” demonstrated by several fashion brands, contemporary fashion is deeply embedded in current global politics.

At the same time, within the academic debate and study of fashion, we can witness an increasing emphasis on the profound political dimensions of fashion as an embodied practice.¹

Fashion and Politics (Figure 1), edited by Djurdja Bartlett, Reader in Histories and Culture of Fashion at London College of Fashion, and author of the pivotal *FashionEast: The Specter that Haunted Socialism*

(2010), is a particularly timely and highly awaited book, which explores the complex relationship of fashion and politics, in relation to the spread of modernity, western capitalism, nationalism, surveillance, terrorism, and individualism. Focusing on fashion, from the mid nineteenth century to our days, the contributors to the book, both renowned and emerging fashion scholars, address how fashion provides visual, material, symbolic and narrative spaces within which political issues are performed, articulated and challenged. What precisely defines the angle of the book is that it “moves away from the epistemological towards the performative,” for it explores what “sartorial practices do in the visual realm of the political” (11). The notion of fashion’s performativity, drawn from the work of Judith Butler (1990), refers here to how individual and collective identities are constructed through sartorial choices, which may represent a site of political articulation, negotiation and resistance.

Bartlett’s extensive and sophisticated analysis, unraveled in the opening chapter “Can fashion be defended?,” provides a comprehensive framework within which the following contributions can be contextualized. Bartlett’s discussion of “political fashion and fashionable politics”—title of the book’s first section—touches on crucial cases, both historical and contemporary: from the newly crowned Queen of Hungary’s outfit to ethnic quotations and the idea of national dress in Eastern Central Europe, from the fashionable *qipao* in interwar China to Missoni’s Pussyhats, from Marx’s coat—an emblematic metaphor in Marx’s *Capital* (1976[1867]) but also a necessary garment and social symbol in Marx’s life—to the communist sartorial references of Gosha Rubchinskiy and Demna Gvasalia. The specter of Marx inevitably punctuates Bartlett’s reflection, which cleverly integrates Marx’s strictly economic theory of commodity fetishism with more recent contributions emphasizing the affective value of the commodity. In fact, while fashion was for Marx the motor, product, and metaphor of the capitalist system—and fashion’s global spread is inextricably tied up with the advance of western capitalism and colonial tendencies—fashion, argues Bartlett, is also an emotionally charged, highly visual, and embodied practice, which can challenge existing power structures, re-articulate old and new hegemonies, and even bring change. According to Bartlett, hence, fashion can—and, I would add, has to—be defended, if we resist oversimplifications that dismiss it as a frivolous phenomenon, or dogmatic interpretations that frame it exclusively in terms of commodity fetishism.

This position is further reinforced by Vinken’s philosophical discussion of the modernist, republican rejection of fashion, and its characterization as an oriental anachronism, the West’s Inner Orient. Challenging and reformulating Edward Said’s thesis, Vinken dissects the tropes defining fashion as the Inner Orient reiterated, albeit in different ways, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, Emile Zola, Thorstein

Veblen, Adolf Loos, and Pierre Bourdieu. She exposes the limitations of a strictly positivist interpretation and, alongside Bartlett, argues for an analysis that takes into account the profound political implications and esthetic aspects of fashion: “fashion needs to be read as a politics against the politics of plain speech, as a politics against the vicissitudes of functionalism” (71).

Indeed, the theme of the second section of the book, “Reform or Revolution,” inaugurated by Vincken’s chapter, is the political nature of dress. The texts included in this section remark precisely that fashion is never apolitical, for even the rejection of fashion, the decision not to care about fashion, ultimately is a political statement. A key case, analyzed by Jin Li Lim, is the politics of dress during Mao’s Cultural Revolution, where appearances had to reflect politics, and thus adhere to an ideologically correct sartorial order. As Lim points out, “fashion in Mao’s China was still responsive to trends, albeit politically defined trends” (74). Furthering the discussion of fashion’s political implications, Carol Tulloch’s treatise on “style activism” provides, in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests, necessary reminders of two crucial periods in our anti-racist, anti-fascist, human and civil rights history. Focusing in particular on Syd Shelton’s powerful photographs of the Rock Against Racism movement (1976–81) and a wedding photo of two key members of the Black Panther Party (1969), she explores style activism as “the embodied making of a political activist self as a statement” (85), as a methodology of activist co-agency, where individuals, as part of a movement, make themselves and, together, can make history.

The mutual constitution of bodies and fashion objects is the theme of the third section, “Bodies and Borders,” where Rondha Garelick offers an original discussion of the connection between terrorism and the body, demonstrating how women’s fashion provides a special portal to explore the cultural dimension of terror. Her analysis of borders of the body and national borders is anchored by key relevant cases such as two iconic garments worn by Marilyn Monroe and Jacqueline Kennedy, the burkini ban, surveillance procedures, ultra-revealing dresses, and the work of Palestinian artist Sharif Waked, not by chance included also in Gabi Scardi’s beautiful photo essay.

In “Insurgent Trend: The Popularity of the Keffiyeh,” Jane Tynan retraces the keffiyeh’s radical history, exploring the many symbolic changes it has undergone through time, which traverse borders and contexts: from being the typical Palestinian peasants’ headwear to becoming a symbol of Palestinian self-determination, from being adopted by European and North American youths as a sign of a left-wing position to the more recent re-interpretations by fashion designers and high street retailers. Tynan raises interesting points on clothing and the national, as well as activism and style, which complement Bartlett’s and Tulloch’s investigations, and in relation to the fashionable appropriation of the

keffiyeh addresses the complexity, malleability and temporality of the meaning attached to material objects.

The final section, “Resistance or Recuperation,” focused on contemporary manifestations of the entanglement of fashion and politics, opens with Anthony Sullivan’s discussion of the sartorial choices of European left leaders such as Pablo Iglesias, Alexis Tsipras, Yanis Varoufakis, and UK’s Jeremy Corbyn. The equalizing male suit, so fervently loved by Nietzsche, as previously discussed by Vinken, embodies, in Sullivan’s contribution, the hegemonic, corporate business suit of much contemporary political fashion. The refusal of the homogeneity and stiffness of this sartorial establishment is at one with the oppositional, anti-austerity politics and anti-neoliberal position of these left leaders, whose style choices, reckons Sullivan, are by now a “cultural dominant.”

Finally, Serkan Delice’s “‘Thrown Away Like a Piece of Cloth’: Fashion Production and the European Refugee Crisis” is an incisive study of the exploitation experienced by Syrian refugees in the Turkish clothing production, of hierarchical division of labor, and the transnational inequalities perpetrated by capitalist globalization. Delice argues for a way beyond the crisis and the capital, which can finally put the people—workers, refugees—center stage. This would mean to move beyond what, in another context, political theorist Françoise Vergès calls the “Racial Capitalocene” (2017), and rather “work together towards creating autonomous, non-hierarchical and hybridised spaces of liberation where we can mix symbolic and material production” (215).

If this final contribution concludes the book by opening up an alternative possibility, the two photo essays “The Uniform, the Subject the Power” and “Three Pair of Khaki Trousers, or How to Decolonise a Museum,” by curators and scholars Gabi Scardi and Erica de Greef respectively, open up, each in its own way, an alternative space. Just as in a gallery space, they in fact create opportunities to look at, reflect, read, and look again, which remind me of Ariella Azoulay’s two-dimensional and folded exhibition “The Potential History of Palestine” (Azoulay 2011). They constitute compelling visual explorations of power, hierarchical structures, collective and cultural identities, within contemporary art and museum practice.

Not only thought-provoking but also beautifully presented and integrated by a rich body of precious visual references, *Fashion and Politics* is undeniably an essential reading to scholars—not exclusively fashion scholars—, students, creative practitioners as well as the broader public, interested in the complex engagement of fashion and politics. It is a thorough, rigorous and insightful study of this crucial relationship from a variety of perspectives, such as fashion theory and history, visual culture, curating, media studies, art history, political theory, which can open further and much needed conversations on the multi-faceted nature of fashion’s deep political dimension.

Note

1. See for instance Behnke, A. 2016. *The International Politics of Fashion: Being Fab in a Dangerous World*. London: Routledge; the issue “Fashion as Politics: Dressing Dissent,” *Fashion Theory*, 23:6, 2019; Gaugele, E. and M. Tutton (eds). 2019. *Fashion and Postcolonial Critique*. Berlin: Sternberg Press; the conference *Fashion Tales – Politics through the Wardrobes*, Università Cattolica of Milan, Italy, June 2020 (postponed to June 2021).

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