

# DRESS CODES ARE ALWAYS OPPRESSIVE AND DIVISIVE.

Walk into any department store such as Marx and Spencer or Debenhams and it soon becomes obvious that, at a minimum, three quarters of the floor space is devoted to women's fashion and only one quarter to men's fashion. Given that, to the capitalist, space is money, we could conclude that women spend at least twice as much on clothing and accessories as do men. They don't. A survey by *Boutique@Ogilvy* in 2016 showed men outspent women in the United States and a comparable study by the *Mail on Line* in 2014 showed spending between the two sexes was reaching parity.

Hence the division of floor space is not purely economic but has a cultural dimension to it. And it is this cultural dimension that is the focus of this article, in particular the patriarchal politics that drives current dress codes.

## **From Matrilineal to Patriarchal societies.**

All-societies have their dress and appearance codes. Traditional hunter-gatherer societies, both in terms of remnants in Africa or South East Asia or the Americas, and evidence from earlier societies showed both men and women indulged in body painting, piercings and stretching of features such as lips and ears. The purpose of this body art was to increase attraction, to demonstrate coming of age, to heighten celebration/ritual and when it was not designed for these purposes, to represent status. Already at this early stage of civilisation, codes of appearance were coming into being.

The controversial aspect of this adornment for later observers was that it encompassed both men and women. It was not only the females who undertook the painful experience of lip stretching, but men as well. Men were as colourful as women and this was difficult for the first Victorian anthropologists to accept, for between them and these people stood an extended period of patriarchal agrarian development (slavery and feudalism) followed by industrialisation.

Archaeological evidence supported by genetic measurement suggests our species is at least 200,000 years old subject to agreement on the time span of a generation. The early anthropologist Lewis Morgan who inspired Marx and then Engels to write the *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* proposed that for around 190,000 years society was either matriarchal or matrilineal organised in primitive communist clans. A comprehensive review of the literature, both supportive and oppositional is to be found in the publication by Knight, C. 2008: *Early Human Kinship Was Matrilineal*. (N. J. Allen's book, H. Callan, R. Dunbar and W. James (eds.), *Early Human Kinship*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 61-82), which is available as a download. It describes the opposition that emerged to the description of early society by Engels - as being communistic - and the resulting vulgarisation of anthropology as a consequence. He concludes that the recent evidence supports Engels' assumptions both archaeological and genetic. Engels' book may appear to have been before its time, but it is a book for all time. It rests proudly on the book shelf of history.

The material underpinning for the formation of these primitive communist societies rests on two legs, firstly that human offspring are pre-born, requiring substantial generational support for their survival and rearing, and secondly by the time-consuming need to both gather as well as to hunt for food. This is elegantly described by Knight in the article cited above. Clans were thus the best social formation to resolve these competing needs. Multi-mothers and fathers provided the best chance for survival of the highly dependent new generation. The sexual division of labour, with women concentrated in the

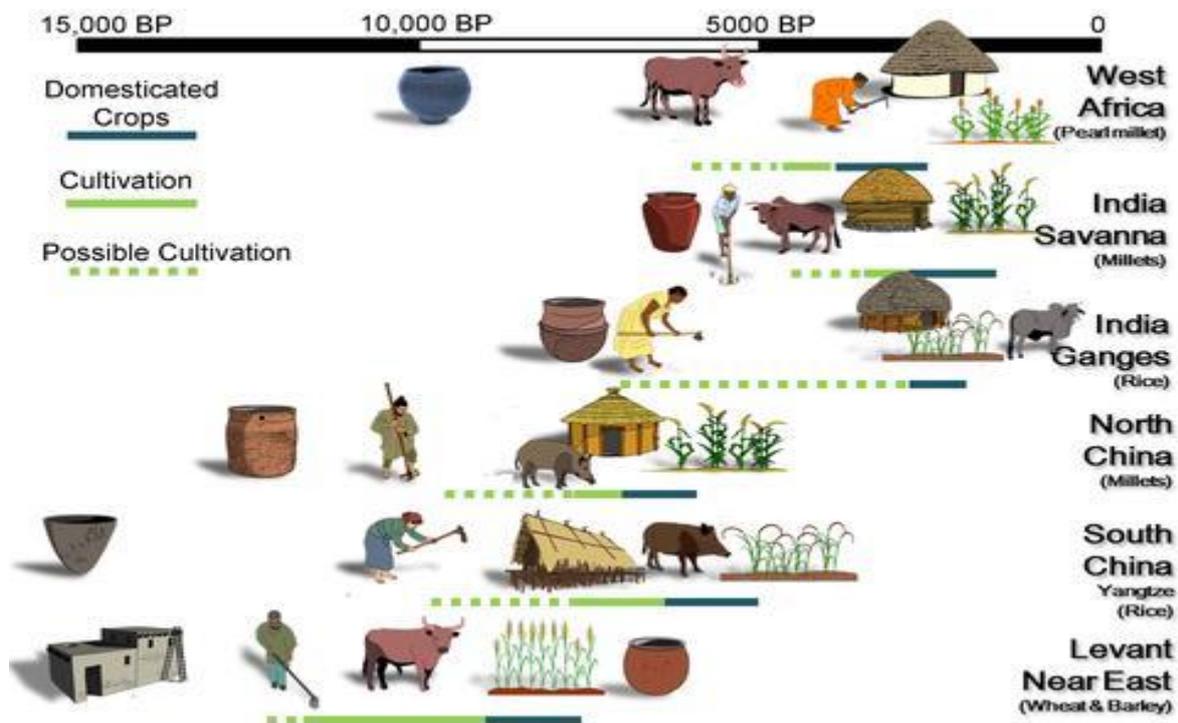
vicinity gathering, and men mobile and away hunting, suggested that the day to day organisation of the clan would best be carried out by the women.

Hence the equality of the sexes characterises this primitive communist era, spanning 90% of human history. In this context the adornment of both the men and women is not surprising. It expressed sexual equality. It finds its mirror image today in those instances where there is a diminishing divide between men and women leading to the feminising of men's fashion.

All this changes with the emergence, as Engels says, of pastoralism and agriculture. The movement from the consumption of nature, eating the animal or preserving its carcass to compensate for seasonal variation, proceeds to accumulation - the husbanding of live animals. Property begins to emerge as ownership of these domesticated animals is needed to monopolise the output of these animals, primarily milk. Wealth and nourishment increases with the number of animals owned, reducing the need for clan dependency and setting the stage for male dominated families.

However, for civilisation to emerge which always involves urban concentrations, a further development is required, not only the cultivation of grasses (primitive agriculture) but the domestication of grasses coupled to irrigation, for it alone provides a sufficient and permanent agricultural surplus to support towns. This transformation of society which is now based on agriculture requires a specialist body of farmers, reduced to slaves.

### The Origins and Spread of Agriculture



(Source: University College London, November 2015.)

It is not known for how long pastoralism endured before becoming subordinated to the farming of domesticated crops, but during the pastoral period, a transitional society, adornment continued. This is concentrated around bride giving and taking. All this changes when farming domesticated crops with irrigation becomes the dominant mode of production resulting in the majority of society being reduced to slaves. As the slaves belong to the slave master and are bought and sold at market,

adornment and celebration of body is no longer practical. There is no need for added attraction nor ritual. Society, as far as the majority goes, is reduced from the bright to the grey.

This is reinforced by religion which begins to emerge under these conditions. All the major religions have their origins in agrarian societies either slave based, or peasant based and are seared by these relationships. The genesis of all the major religions across the world, formed around the major estuaries of all the rivers arcing from the Mediterranean Sea, through to the Arabian Sea and on to the South China Sea, is to legitimise and reinforce class relations based on the private ownership of the land where the main human activity is working that land. More precisely, the cultural purpose of religion, all religions, is to conserve labour power for use by the landlord/master and to sanctify the blood line which preserves this exploitation, making them necessarily misogynistic.

To maximise labour power for the use of others, sexual power is to be minimised. All distractions are to be avoided. For this to happen physical barriers need to appear between the sexes. This is the advent of modest dress replacing the immodest dress characteristic of primitive communist societies, or even the absence of dress. Modesty becomes an issue of faith. Sexuality is reduced from recreation to procreation, confined to the mere reproduction of the labouring classes. Sexual equality and sexuality is turned into a sin, though not for the hypocritical rulers and beneficiaries of those societies. Humans stripped of their sexuality, now function as labouring machines.

Of course, modesty of dress applies to both sexes, except that in a patriarchal society, the strictures on women's modesty is more severe than for men, and the penalties for immodesty are correspondingly harsher. This is true for all the major religions, though in the interest of politics, Islam has been singled out, whereas the covering of hair in religious Jewish sects has conveniently been ignored as has the attire of Christian nuns.

### **From religious suppression of feeling to manipulation of feeling.**

For many thousands of years, as far as the labouring classes went, modesty and greyness characterised their lives. The transition from agrarian societies to history's first industrial society – capitalism – did not need to change anything. Poverty saw to that. The enclosure movements which drove labourers, now stripped of their instruments of labour, including their rural handy crafts, into the squalid new industrial towns affected their attire. Their impoverishment did not invite a dress code because they merely subsisted on the cast offs from the rich, with their position in the order reflected by how thread bare their clothes were. These cast offs represented the first instance of trickle-down economics.

Nonetheless the same morality, the same strictures were in place. Victorian morality was the capitalist reaction to the growing weight of the urban working class and the need to bear down on it, rob it of culture, and impose work discipline. More, it had the further purpose of insulating the masses from the growing opulence at the top financed by their labour and that of Empire.

However, within the womb of Victorian society, shielded from the masses, located in the centre of major cities like London, Manchester and Edinburgh, the modern forms of merchandising needed to circulate the rising volume and variety of luxury goods, was emerging. These were the department stores. They were the forerunners of the mass merchandising that was to appear in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Localised merchandising prevailed until the 1920s when mass national marketing came of age.

Edward Bernays a cousin of Sigmund Freud, is credited with being the father of modern marketing in the late 1920s. That it should be men leading this development was predictable. For a good analysis of modern marketing read: (<http://listverse.com/2013/05/16/10-shady-origins-of-consumerism-in-the-us/>) Mr Bernays recognised that marketing depended on engaging with the feelings of consumers

rather than engaging them cerebrally by focusing on the merits of the product (concentrating on its use value). More precisely, the marketing and advertising effort had to be based on the manipulation of feeling. And there is no higher feeling than sexuality, especially in the eye of the patriarch.

The groundwork was being set for marketing and its avowal of feeling becoming the new consumer religion displacing the feudal religion based on the denial of feeling. Henceforth the elaborate shopping emporium would become the new church, temple or synagogue where the creations of man would be worshipped rather than the “creator of man”. A new religion was borne that was to be much more insidious and manipulative than the one it replaced.

The move from exclusive marketing to inclusive marketing percolating throughout society, at least in North America, Europe and Japan, would have to wait for the effects of world war two to wear off. Until then the poverty of the masses precluded them from discretionary spending. At the turn of the century, even in the USA and Britain, 80-90% of the income of workers was spent on basic necessities. Choice was something still confined to the rich.

After the war, growing working class pressure and the shadow of the USSR, forced employers to give back some of the rapid increase in the productivity of labour. The standard of living of workers increased even if families still had only one breadwinner. By the 1960s, the discretionary spending of male and even female workers had become significant and the true mass market matured. In 1950 32% of wages were spent on “other” or if adding in clothing it rose to 43% (Source: <https://www.bls.gov/opub/uscs/1950.pdf>) and by 1960 that had increased to 36% or 46% respectively. (ibid) In comparison today only 3.1 % is spent on clothes (2016) compared to 10% in 1960 while discretionary spending has not increased significantly because of the increase in housing, health and pension costs. (<https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/consumer-expenditures/2016/pdf/home.pdf>)

One of the main marketing efforts emanating in the “roaring twenties” was directed at fashion, targeting women. Until the emergence of female designers in the 1960s, this was a male led industry based on the idealised male version of female sexuality. This is clearly seen in two areas that distinguish men and women. High heeled shoes and the removal of body hair. In analysing these distinctions, it is important to understand what drove these styles in contrast to earlier societies.

Originally it was men wore high heels up to the mid- 18<sup>th</sup> century, and both women and men removed body hair as far back as the Pharaohs, but they did so for one reason and one reason only, status. The phenomena under capitalism is somewhat different. Capitalism, society’s first fully formed market economy, is driven by the insatiable drive to develop new use values, products that can be sold. The use value or utility is not important to the seller, it is important to the buyer. The buyer must want to buy the product.

This is where style comes in. Of all the set of use values, style is the most manipulative. Firstly, it is easily rendered obsolete even before it is worn out, forcing consumers to buy this year’s fashion and dump last year’s fashion. Secondly it is all inclusive, style is a “must have”, it is essential to be part of the fashionable herd, to keep up appearances. The modern form of excommunication is reserved for those people who are rendered unfashionable because they either cannot afford or reject the latest look.

Of course, within this set of use values, competition rages. Once a new use value is established the competitive race is on to make it stand out and command shelf space, which invariably means it is made more extreme. High heels get higher, skirts get shorter, clothes get tighter and underwired bras get shapelier. Beauty becomes increasingly painful, and if pain is ignored, increasingly damaging to the body.

In the 1920s the modern feminine look appears. Dresses until then covered the body except the head and hands. High heeled shoes and shaven legs and arms were not an issue because they were hidden. What changed everything was the introduction of new styles of dresses, blouses and skirts. Arms and legs were revealed as hems rose and cuffs shrank. High heeled shoes which originally shaped men's calves up to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century jumped out of the pornographic shadows and into main stream fashion. Now it was women's legs that were to be reshaped despite all the discomfort this caused the wearer. Form came to triumph over function in the name of beauty both in the eye of the beholder and the eye of the participant. To this day, 54% of women consider high heel shoes makes them feel more attractive/sexier, 48% feel it enhances their legs and 39% because it makes them taller. (<https://www.outletshoppers.com/history-of-the-high-heel/>)

Clearly, men could also wear short sleeve shirts and shorts. But why it was women who had to alter or enhance their appearance and not men, has everything to do with patriarchy. It was men who idealised women and not the other way around. It was women who were to be the bright peacocks and while men remained the grey vultures though men out-earned women and could more easily afford the latest fashions. Women's fashion would continue to be shaped by patriarchy.

All this colour and variety, after all the years of grey was presented as emancipation. And in a sense, it was, because it overturned the "everyday ordinary" that religion and poverty had imposed on this section of society. But to be true emancipation, it needed to be claimed by the women themselves, which began to occur with the growth of feminism in the 1960s, itself fuelled by the changing material conditions of women as they entered the workforce thereby earning their economic independence.

An independence movement broke out, a feminist revolt against the stylisation of women by men. But for that rebellion to succeed it needed to abolish the sexual inequality between men and women which was to be a more protracted and twisting struggle, then the struggle over appearances itself.

### **Imperialism and dress code.**

The pacification of the occupied requires the destruction, or if not the destruction, then the usurping of the culture of the oppressed. This always includes an imported dress code. Imperialism has always set a strict dress codes to differentiate the colonialists from the indigenous population and to prevent the indigenous people from identifying with their past. In the case of hunter-gatherer societies missionaries imposed modest dress codes to cover up the "primitive immodesty" they encountered even when these constricting clothes caused medical problems not experienced by these peoples hitherto. In the case of societies in more temperate climates it involved modifying their working clothes and often banning their ceremonial clothes.

It is clear that in oppressive circumstances, when societies are robbed of their heritage, there is a desire and a struggle to reclaim the past. This applies to dress codes as much as to any other cultural aspect. This is particularly true today regarding the head veil and head scarf worn electively if not rebelliously, by Muslim women. This is seldom understood by the oppressors.

On the one side, western women are cast as free, free to wear what they choose, whereas Muslim women are portrayed as being subjugated by a strict dress code. Both are subject to their own religion. On the one side, the religion of consumerism with its on-going pressures for western women to look a certain way today, is itself conformist. On the other side, the avoidance of this pressure modest dress enables, is seen as a liberation from these pressures. The cultivated and often imposed immodesty of western women's clothing is thus not seen as an agreeable alternative to the more conservative clothing found in religious societies.

Like all religious matters, dress codes can only be resolved by transforming social relations. A socialist society which ends marketing, which ends manipulation, which ends sexual inequality, which ends class divisions, ends dress codes permanently. It ends the pressure inflicted on women in capitalist society to look a certain way, just as it will end the pressure on men to look distinctively different. The same applies to the division between boys and girls.

Without dress codes, clothing will finally become art. Clothing will be flowing, body enhancing not body deforming, colourful without being tawdry, often individually produced. In societies restricted by modest dress, the hope and promise of a socialist society in turn will reveal that it is impossible to fight for the future by holding on to the past.

Brian Green. May 2018