
Little has happened since 1989 to challenge the view that aesthetically, ‘actually existing socialism’ was one enormous bread queue, its dowdily dressed denizens shivering dozily in front of a grey concrete building housing a state bureaucracy of some sort. To this Cold-War image has been added the peculiar commodity fetishes of Ostalgie, with the previously ridiculed attempts at consumer goods being put back into production. Judd Stitziel’s study of the East-German consumer economy acknowledges early on that the DDR never managed to create a distinctively socialist aesthetic – instead, via a series of misunderstandings and disavowed misappropriations of Western fashions and styles, there emerged such distinctive objects as the standardised dress, the Plattenbauten apartment block and the Trabant. Nonetheless, from the title on down, Fashioning Socialism makes associative points, or takes party sloganeering literally, to the effect that a Socialist style was considered necessary or at least possible. The unmentioned inverse – in terms of the intersection of the sartorial and the socialist – of the frumpy conformism of the Eastern Bloc is radical chic. That is, the moment in the late 60s and early 70s when images of Cuban or African-American revolutionaries adorned countless bed-sits and halls of residence. It is customary to take this phenomenon as having little more theoretical significance than the DDR’s politicised polyester. Radical chic, best encapsulated in the infatuation with the Black Panther Party, is usually seen as militaristic or romantic, a fetish disconnected from quotidian, non-spectacular politics.1

A ‘complete Panther uniform – black beret, black slacks, black shoes, black pimp socks or regular socks, shined shoes, blue shirt, and a black turtleneck’,2 in Bobby Seale’s description – was considered part of ‘armed propaganda’: something to make the Panthers identifiable on the street, adding the imposing force necessary for their ghetto police ‘patrols’.3 It could just as easily be associated, however, with their explicit project to radicalise the lumpenproletariat. This was the institution of a kind of revolutionary organisation of Stagolees, which aimed to make politics specifically aesthetically attractive to them, taking its cues from their jarring and ostentatious fashions (those ‘pimp socks’), rather than from the earth-toned ‘roots’ proselytised by ‘jive cultural nationalist intellectuals’. The vicarious thrills that the outfits might have given to their white and/or middle-class fellow soixante-huitards was irrelevant. Nonetheless, it is not altogether surprising that the party leadership felt the need after a couple of years to ban the wearing of the uniform at anything other than public functions, after it was used merely for posing or intimidation (or rather, as intimidation of the Panthers’ own constituency as opposed to the police). This was not to be an everyday outfit. Another, much earlier example of radical chic never had the time to percolate down into the culture industry at large, though it took the everyday directly as the

1. Most famously in Tom Wolfe’s arch depiction of Panther dress and demeanour as a way of both unnerving and exciting their haute-bourgeois sponsors: Wolfe 1970.
2. Seale 1991, p. 367
3. Newton 1995, p. 143: ‘we were an unusual sight in Richmond or any other place, dressed in our black leather jackets, wearing black berets and gloves, and carrying shotguns over our shoulders. People would stop and call to us, asking what we were distributing… walking armed through (a mainly black area) was our propaganda’.

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battleground for socialist aesthetics. I am referring to the projects in the early-mid 1920s by Soviet constructivists and productivists, from Vladimir Tatlin to Alexandra Exter, and particularly the LEF Group designers Popova and Stepanova, to rationalise the design of dress and dismantle the fashion system, while somehow retaining a certain aesthetic frisson from pattern and cut on body.

The constructivist engagement in fashion will be discussed later, as a possible example of a way in which to imagine a performative politics that would not automatically fall into the trap of exclusive countercultural consumption, avoiding the post-New-Left conundrum whereby the possession of the correct look stands in for thought and praxis. For all its laudable refusal to aestheticise one’s politics, the alternative to such an engagement – in the form of asceticism or deliberate dressing-down – risks denuding politics of any hint of excitement or libidinal charge, leading precisely to the DDR situation of an easy and quick defeat by the commodity desires of consumer-capitalism. This was the trajectory dramatised by Garbo’s Soviet apparatchik in the Billy-Wilder-scripted *Ninotchka*, exchanging her unisex boiler suit for a glittery frock and pearls at the first shimmering sight of Parisian couture.

These questions do not tend to be asked in fashion theory, nor should one especially expect them to be. Although it would be foolish to claim that this is not an area worthy of serious theoretical and political work, much of it seems stuck in a particular degeneration of Birmingham-school cultural studies. In the late 70s, the likes of Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture* posited a ‘resistance’ through rituals, and specifically spectacularised dress – a response to particular changes in the socio-political conjuncture at the level of everyday life, affected no doubt by prejudices, deflections and so forth, but still in some way oppositional. What this has effectively become is a discourse where ‘resistances’ of a sort are still offered: through consumption, capitalist subjects resist paternalism, universalism, modernism and, of course, a Marxism that would ‘totalise’ them, link their practices to the economy, or most appalling of all, suggest that ideology or even ‘false consciousness’ might just underpin some of these ‘choices’.

Accordingly, consumption becomes the definitive political act. A typical example, like Berg’s anthology *Fashioning the Body Politic*, holds up shopping as the incommensurable force undermining all ‘totalitarianisms’. An essay here on the sartorial politics of the Falange in Spain effectively explains Franco’s eventual overthrow via the trickle-down effects of American consumer-capitalism’s alleged unsettling of fascism’s protectionist autarchy. The concluding passage runs:

> the way in which Falangist women were coming to use the language of clothes suggested an increasingly informed individual choice that subverted political, familial and religious structures in dress, and in so doing, subverted a great deal more.

What is coyly implied is that authority is not ‘subverted’ by such universalist or allegedly masculine acts as collective action, but by *individual choice*. Another essay in the collection,

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5. An interesting contention, given that the US propped up this unpopular régime for thirty years.