

Fashion and Democratic Relationships*

Joshua I. Miller
Lafayette College

Clothing has political significance because it affects the relationships among citizens. Clothing is not simply a private or personal matter; it implies the existence of an intersubjective social world in which one presents oneself and is seen by others. In examining the implications of fashion for political relationships, I will concede that fashion aggravates antagonistic relationships among citizens when it is used to flaunt one's status and wealth, but I will also argue that clothes can also be used to exhibit respect toward others and allegiance to a group. Clothes, therefore, sometimes facilitate the democratic ideal of widely distributed power. Fashion can provoke dialogue about social and political matters, and that dialogue is democratic. When fashion manifests creativity, respect, allegiance, or membership, the relationships that it fosters are potentially democratic.
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Joshua Miller, Professor of Government and Law at Lafayette College in Easton, PA, is the author of *The Rise and Fall of Democracy in Early America, 1630–1789* (Penn State Press, 1991) and *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James* (University Press of Kansas, 1997). His essay “No Success Like Failure: Existential Politics in Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night*,” appeared in *Polity* in 1990. He invites correspondence at: millerj@lafayette.edu.

Introduction: Central Arguments and Definitions

What does fashion have to do with politics? Many people take fashion to be private and trivial, while politics is public and important, yet from time to time fashion’s political importance is easier to see.¹ For instance, much of the tension between Muslims and non-Muslims, and within Islam itself, is expressed through

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1. Philip Rieff makes a suggestive and ominous link between fashion and politics in “Aesthetic Functions in Modern Politics,” *World Politics* 5 (July 1953): 478–502.

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conflict over dress.² A recent *New York Times* article on the French government's desire to "integrate" Muslims into mainstream French culture began:

The French interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, was booed and whistled at when he said at the annual conference of one of this country's most important Muslim groups last month that Muslim women would have to go bareheaded when posing for pictures for their identity cards. He did not seem to notice—or perhaps chose to ignore—that a vast majority of the women in the audience were wearing headscarves. A few of them had even swathed their faces in black and hidden their hands under black gloves. And perhaps the law-and-order interior minister can be forgiven for overlooking the shopping bags on sale at a score of kiosks, the ones with the silhouette of a woman wearing a veil and the phrase "I love my veil" in English and Arabic.³

One sees in this story the theme of multicultural respect, which I will show later to be necessary for democratic political relationships.

Another clear convergence between fashion and politics can be seen in the criticisms leveled by many feminists since Mary Wollstonecraft against fashion for attempting to transform women into sexual objects, reducing them to bodies and appearance, and encouraging preoccupation with trivia.⁴ Fashions such as the corset, Chinese foot binding, high heels, and the beauty ideals of thinness and permanent youth, have been seen as dangerous to women's health. The fact that these issues, first raised by feminists, are of widespread concern, have been made public, and in some cases have led to collective action, makes them political.

Yet another political dimension of fashion can be seen in the institutional regulation of dress. Many workplaces and high schools devise dress codes for students and employees; such codes often involve racial differences (e.g., will United Parcel Service workers be permitted to sport dreadlocks?), freedom of speech (e.g., young people were sent home from school for wearing T-shirts that opposed George Bush during the War in Iraq), and sexual display (is it legitimate to require young women to dress modestly?).⁵ These themes connected to

2. See Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17 (1990): 41–55. See also Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

3. Elaine Sciolino, "Letter From Europe; France Envisions a Citizenry of Model Muslims," *New York Times*, May 7, 2003. See also "Florida Court Bars Veil in License Photo," *New York Times*, June 7, 2003.

4. See particularly Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1992); Susan Faludi, *Backlash: the Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991); and Robin Tolmach Lakoff and Raquel L. Scherr, *Face Value: The Politics of Beauty* (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984). See also my essay, "Beauty and Democratic Power," *Fashion Theory* 6 (2002): 277–97.

5. Niraj Warikoo and Joel Thurtell, "Antiwar Protest: Student's T-Shirt Reignites Free-Speech Debate," *Detroit Free Press*, February 25, 2003, http://www.freep.com/news/locway/speech25_20030225.htm; *Eatman v. United Parcel Service*, 194 F. Supp. 2d 256 (S.D.N.Y.2002).

fashion—intercultural encounters, fashion’s relationship to women’s sexuality and bodies, and regulation of dress—clearly show that clothing frequently has political significance. In this essay, I want to focus on two slightly different political themes embedded in fashion, namely equality and democratic relationships.

Democratic political relationships are necessary for common action and citizens’ power. Fashion affects citizens’ perceptions of one another, and therefore influences their political bonds. A concern with such relationships has been a preoccupation of democratic political theorists, including Hannah Arendt and Wilson Carey McWilliams, who have argued that common action requires ties of friendship among citizens.⁶ To define “political relationships” it might help to think of their opposite, namely separation, alienation, and competition to accumulate material possessions. Perhaps it is useful to distinguish an active from a potential political relationship. In an active democratic relationship, working on a campaign or action brings people in actual contact. Someone might be said to have a potential political relationship with all those who support a particular candidate for state, local, or even union office, even people who do not know each other. In another potential relationship, citizens are joined by certain values, history, and common experience, and therefore feel themselves to be part of the same city or country.⁷ If citizens see themselves as members of radically different worlds, divided by sharp divisions of wealth and status, they might not imagine the possibility of common action, but if their clothes remind them of links with one another, they may feel less isolated and enfeebled.

Fashion is rarely depicted as a catalyst to democratic action. Typically, fashion is seen as the enemy of equality, and therefore of civic alliances. The most influential work in fashion theory, Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), criticized fashion as being the embodiment of hierarchy, conspicuous consumption, leisure and waste, emulation (envy), and the oppression of women.⁸ According to Veblen, fashion is used primarily to display one’s wealth

6. In *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1973), Arendt describes the link between isolated citizens and the rise of the totalitarian state. Previously, Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* had associated individualism, or the breakdown of civic ties among the citizens, with the increased power of the centralized state. See also McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973).

7. See John H. Schaar, “The Case for Patriotism,” in *Legitimacy in the Modern State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1981), 285–312.

8. A recent edition is Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory Of The Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin, 1994). For two of many examples of Veblen’s impact on contemporary fashion theory, see Quentin Bell, *On Human Finery*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1976), and Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987). In *Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), Gilles Lipovetsky also draws on Veblen.

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and to lord it over others. It is important to ask what remains true and what is now dated in Veblen's analysis, yet I do not want to concentrate in this essay on how fashion actually functions to reveal or hide social inequality.⁹ My training and interests do not equip me to contribute to the sociology of fashion. Instead, as a political theorist, I want to discuss an implied theme in Veblen, that is, fashion's effects on political bonds among citizens. Fashion is one part of the culture that shapes citizens' attitudes toward themselves and each other, and therefore fashion is relevant to democracy and is an appropriate subject for theoretical inquiry. Ever since Tocqueville, political theorists have understood that democracy produces certain mores, or habits of thought and action, and those mores affect political practices.¹⁰ Clothes are not as significant an influence as race, class, and gender on political relationships, but conflicts and affiliations among citizens based on race, class, and gender often express themselves in dress.

In examining the implications of fashion for political relationships I will concede that fashion aggravates antagonism among citizens when it is used to flaunt status and wealth, and that the display of luxury items often encourages arrogance on the part of those who have more possessions while it saps the confidence of citizens who lack them.¹¹ But clothes can also be used to exhibit respect toward others and allegiance to a group, and in such instances dress reinforces ties with others. When fashion manifests allegiance, membership, and respect for members of both the group and the larger community, the relationships it fosters are appropriately called "democratic." Thus, clothes sometimes facilitate the democratic ideal of widely distributed power. In addition, fashion can provoke dialogue about social and political matters, and that dialogue is a part of a democratic culture. Finally, there are democratic modes of dress that incorporate creativity and respect, along with democratic attitudes toward the dress of others.

By "democracy" I do not refer to the American political system, but to an ideal, at the heart of which are citizens who share approximately equal political power, status, and wealth.¹² For participatory democrats this ideal serves as a

9. For sociological studies that examine what is now accurate in Veblen's descriptions of fashion, see Diana Crane, *Fashion and its Social Agendas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), and Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1990). They crucially revise Veblen, although they lack his moral outrage.

10. See Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making Of A Political And Theoretical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 202-28.

11. Luxurious display probably affects more intensely those people who read fashion or gossip magazines and watch award shows, although fashion's effects are widespread both because it shapes appearance ideals for both men and women and limits the choice of clothing available in stores.

12. On democracy, see C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

standard for judging political action. In the democratic ideal, citizens should live in political communities and act together for shared purposes. Citizens should have the power to make decisions, aided but not supplanted by bureaucrats, politicians, and technical experts. As an ideal, a democracy implies a fairly small society, one in which people might not need to identify one another by their clothes. As I have indicated, democracy is a goal, not a reality, although of course there are significant democratic elements in American political culture. In this essay, I begin by assuming that the United States is an immense society in which citizens do not know each other well and that citizens should try to forge democratic communities in which they are politically active and friendly with their fellow citizens. Those communities will be different from each other, although they should strive to be internally diverse and respectful of one another. I am interested in the possibility that fashion, a medium associated with elitism, individualism, and spectacle, might encourage attachments and mutual respect among the citizenry.

Elements of democracy relevant to an exploration of fashion include free expression, equality, solidarity, respect, and citizen action. One could start by suggesting that lively dress is a manifestation of a democratic culture.¹³ In *The Language of Clothes*, Alison Lurie contends: "Fashion is free speech, and one of the privileges, if not always one of the pleasures of a free world."¹⁴ Although they did not equate democracy with individual rights and did not think that an individual had a "right" to dress in a particular way, the ancient Athenians may have associated democracy with latitude for individual expression. Pericles' funeral oration could be read as partly applying to dress: "The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes. . ."¹⁵ In *The Republic*, Plato invoked the metaphor of clothing when he criticized democracy for being "a delightful, anarchic, colorful regime. . . . Like a variegated cloak splashed with every color, democracy is embellished with every personality and may appear the

13. It could also be argued, à la Tocqueville, that a true tyrant does not care what people wear as long as they do not challenge his power. "[Democratic despotism] likes to see the citizens enjoy themselves, provided that they think of nothing but enjoyment" (J. P. Mayer ed., *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence [New York: Harper & Row, 1988], 692). Some repressive regimes might produce drab clothes, or so I imagine, like the former Soviet Union and some fundamentalist Muslim countries, but others like Cuba or Franco's Spain might have lively patterns of dress. Cultural traditions may be more important than political regimes in determining clothing styles, but democracy generates a certain type of open culture.

14. Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, an Owl Book, 2000 [1981]).

15. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley and T. E. Wick (New York: Modern Library, 1982), 108.

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most gorgeous; and many, gaping like women and children at its colors, perhaps will judge it the most beautiful.”¹⁶ Plato thought that democracy’s variety and openness may appear beautiful to many people, but democratic individualism would undermine the bonds of community needed for a healthy polity. In short, free dress has long been associated, for better or worse, with democratic freedom.¹⁷

Other dimensions of democracy have different implications for dress. Equality is a central element of democracy, and it denotes much different clothing than does free expression. In Thomas More’s egalitarian *Utopia*, the citizens wear

unpretentious garments made of leather and pelts, which last seven years. When they go out in public, they cover these rough work clothes with a cloak. Throughout the entire island, these cloaks are of the same colour, which is that of natural wool. . . (T)here everyone is content with a single cloak, and generally wears it for two years. There is no reason why he should wear any more garments, for if he had them, he would not be better protected against the cold, nor would he appear the least bit more fashionable.¹⁸

If free expression implies variety, equality may imply uniformity, even uniforms, such as the Mao suit in China or the use of school uniforms to mute class differences among students.¹⁹

Along with freedom and equality, a third element of democracy is mutual respect among citizens of different races, genders, sexual orientations, religions, and social classes. Respect for others may be as important to democracy as individual freedom because respect fosters the bonds among citizens that are necessary for common action, a fourth dimension of democracy. Democratic citizens are not passive or isolated, but work together to shape the decisions that

16. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. and ed. Raymond Larson (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1979), 215–6 [557c–58c].

17. Sexy dress among women is part of the indictment of the West by Islamic fundamentalists. The following story catches some of the indictment’s flavor: “Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) has urged the government to cancel an upcoming concert by pop diva Mariah Carey, saying her performance is immoral and promotes un-Islamic values. . . ‘Everyone knows Mariah Carey presents herself in a sexy, unacceptable and almost vulgar manner,’ Mr. Ahmad Sabki Yusof, a leader of PAS’ youth wing, said yesterday.” Associated Press, “PAS Slams Mariah Carey,” *The Straits Times Interactive*, January 16, 2004. <http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/asia/story/0,4386,230375,00.html>

18. More, *Utopia*, revised edition, ed. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 53. More wrote *Utopia* in a monastic Catholic tradition that opposes the sin of vanity and supports ascetic egalitarianism.

19. See Paul Fussell, *Uniforms: Why We Are What We Wear* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2002). On the Mao suit, see Valerie Steele and John S. Major, *China Chic: East Meets West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999). Uniforms do not always imply democratic equality. On the use of uniforms to create mass organizations and links between leaders and followers, see Rieff, “Aesthetic Functions.” I will show later that uniforms, such as those of prisoners, janitors, and clerks, can be used to indicate low social status.

affect their lives.²⁰ Also, respect is necessary to achieve some measure of cohesion and good will among disparate groups in a vast and diverse society. Respect here implies good will, interest in, and sensitivity toward the opinions of others, even those one does not know well.

In short, the democratic ideal contains personal freedom, equality, mutual respect, and common action. These various aspects of democracy can be expressed in clothing and appearance, even though they are sometimes in tension with one another. The mix is essential because any one of them without the others could lead in an anti-democratic direction. There could be personal freedom in dress without equality, respect, community, or action. A dress culture could be based on equality while lacking freedom and common action. And dress could provide solidarity and action, but if respect for others is lacking, that solidarity and action could take the form of fascism. Because of the complex nature of democracy there is no one form of democratic dress, but democratic dress contains some combination of freedom, respect, equality, and solidarity.

In a classroom lecture, political theorist Michael Rogin once described a fashionable person as someone whose appearance cried, “look at me!” when entering a room. In this essay, I employ two other definitions of “fashion”: (1) the stylish and trendy clothes of an era, season, place, or group²¹; (2) the inter-related phenomena of body, clothes, and appearance; in short, the public presentation of the self.²² According to this broad definition, everyone is involved with fashion to some degree because we all enter public spaces wearing some clothing and doing something or other with our body’s hair. I recognize that these two definitions are contradictory in significant ways. Many people deeply care about being in fashion in their dress; they know the trends and want to be with or ahead of the curve. Others reject fashionableness altogether, while still wearing clothes and having a style, even if it is a bad one. The pursuit of perpetual change in fashion is destructive to tradition and common ties, but fashion in the broader sense can also be useful to democratic movements, as I will show below.

Let me offer two additional brief clarifications of my use of the term “fashion.” First, it might be asked if fashion shapes political relationships or reflects them. My answer is “both.” Fashion is a “sign” of American political culture; inequality,

20. The classic reference is Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, e.g., 235–37.

21. If the notion of trendiness requires an example, see Abby Goodnough and David M. Herszenhorn, “Kennedy Seeks Her Footing as Schools’ Rainmaker” *New York Times* (June 4, 2003). The authors were surprised to see Caroline Kennedy wearing Merrell sandals, which are fashionable among alternative and outdoorsy types. The surprise was not that she was dressed fashionably, but the group with which her shoes identified her. On how trends rise and fall, see Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 2000).

22. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959); Anne Norton, *Republic of Signs: Liberal Theory and American Popular Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 51.

individualism, and solidarity are expressed through fashion. It is also a motor force of culture; fashion affects equality, individualism, and solidarity. Secondly, in this essay, except in the following section, I am not primarily concerned with the fancy clothes displayed in fashion magazines and at the Academy Awards because “haute couture,” the handmade clothes of the rich and famous, has little immediate relevance to the lives of most citizens.

One element of fashion deserves special emphasis: clothing is inextricably embedded in the social world. Dress is not an isolated activity. One attains an image of appropriate dress from public pictures or personal role models. The fact that dress is an inherent element in everyday life points to the fact that one lives in a world where one is forced to make a visual presentation of one’s self and to witness the self-presentation of others. The public nature of the fashion system is easily recognized once noticed. Most people buy their clothes at stores; workers, directed by manufacturers and designers, make the clothes under certain conditions—in union shops, sweatshops, or something in the middle. Stores’ buyers choose to sell certain brands, colors, and fabrics; advertisers try to entice customers. And the clothes, once purchased, are worn in public and proclaim one kind of message or another. So the idea that “I dress solely for myself” is for the most part illusory; one expresses one’s “individuality” only by referring in self-presentation to those groups and role models with which one identifies, and by choosing among pre-existing styles. Having now established fashion’s public and political nature, my question is, what type of fashion is appropriate to achieving democratic political relationships? In the next section of the essay, I will articulate the argument that fashion is highly undemocratic, and will then outline the democratic possibilities of dress.

Fashion as Enemy of Equality

The traditional criticism of fashion as an undemocratic part of American culture is true and merits full articulation. Fashion has given more status to the thin, beautiful, and rich; it has embodied the competition for wealth, respect, and attention. Inequality throughout the world has been manifested in patterns of consumption, including fashion. Some people are the lords of consumption, and have or could have the many luxuries that the world has to offer, including designer brand shoes, purses, and briefcases, great restaurants, fancy cars, vacations in exotic places, first-class travel, and spacious houses at the shore, in the mountains, and in the city.²³ The rest of us are crammed into coach class, and

23. The facts and figures of inequality can be found in the work of Kevin Phillips, most recently *Wealth and Democracy: The Dangerous Politics of American Prosperity* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002). For a vivid account of material inequality, see Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools* (New York: Crown, 1991).

are stuck in the sticks or in cramped apartments during the summer. We must buy our clothes at K-Mart, Target, or the Goodwill thrift shops.

In this essay, I assume rather than argue for the injustice of the unequal distribution of goods; my primary concern is with the effect of that distribution on relationships among the citizens. Jean-Jacques Rousseau helps us to see fashion's corrosive effect upon them. In his *A Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau asserted that once people leave their individual isolation in the state of nature, they begin to compare themselves based on "wealth, nobility or rank, power and personal merit. . ." When they emerge into society, Rousseau declared, people want others to admire their looks and belongings. "[T]his universal desire for reputation, honours and promotion, which devours us all. . .excites and multiplies passions, and. . .in turning all men into competitors, rivals or rather enemies, it causes every day failures and successes and catastrophes of every sort. . ."24 Some people express their desire for esteem by demanding a big office or putting their titles on the door; a common way to display one's wealth and status, especially for women outside the workplace, is through clothes and possessions. Many people proclaim, in effect, "look what I've got! Don't you wish you had my Louis Vuitton bag, Manolo Blahnik shoes, swimming pool, and Porsche? I'm better than you schmoes who don't have what I do." And many people believe them and crave the \$2000 Calvin Klein suit, the high-definition television, a large house, or the new luxury cars owned by their neighbors and friends.

Possessions create social hierarchies, which are accompanied by emotional components of arrogance and jealousy. Those who lack a "respectable" level of possessions compared to others around them often feel shoddy or ashamed.²⁵ The shame is, as Veblen pointed out, especially acute for those who have to reduce their standard of living. Usually, people experience their level of consumption as the minimum necessary for a respectable life, and it is painful to give up what seems necessary, a particularly apt point of Veblen's in today's economy, in which many people who were doing well financially have become victims of un- or under-employment.²⁶ Fashion contributes to the attitude that the wealthy are more powerful, competent, and worthy than everyone else.²⁷ The rich, powerful, and well dressed often disdain people wearing unfashionable or shoddy clothes whom they pass in the street, while those dressed shabbily may be intimidated when entering a fancy office building. Ken Loach's film, "Bread and Roses" depicted such an office building; in one scene a janitor says to another, "I have a theory about these uniforms. When we put them on, we become

24. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin, 1984 [1755]), 132-33.

25. Veblen, *Leisure Class*, 103-104.

26. Veblen, *Leisure Class*, 102.

27. Veblen, *Leisure Class*, 26, 29-30.

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invisible.”²⁸ Lurie overstates the case, but makes a similar point when she writes, “The uniform acts as a sign that we should not or need not treat someone as a human being, and that they need not and should not treat us as one.”²⁹ Admittedly, this is a socially vertical view of the matter; from the horizontal perspective, uniforms might help to create solidarity among workers.

Social competition for admiration or superiority is not a national game, played by clear-cut groups of rich, middle-class, workers, and poor. As Veblen noted, the categories “have” and “have not” are relative. “[E]ach class envies and emulates the class next above it in the social scale, while it rarely compares itself with those below or with those who are considerably in advance.”³⁰ Professors may want a car as luxurious as the other professors of their rank at their school, but they usually do not try to match the consumption level of stockbrokers and movie stars. Students in urban public high schools may compete with other students in their vicinity, but not with students at boarding schools. In any portion of society, regardless of race, income, region, and neighborhood, there are always some people who have more and others with less. The portion constitutes the competitive playing field. The constants in the competition are arrogance, envy, and shame, not the particular items for consumption.

In short, Rousseau and Veblen’s descriptions of inequality and fashion capture a good deal of present-day reality. People continue to show off their clothes and possessions, including cars, homes, and accessories, while many of the rest of us are trapped in envy, desire, and feelings of inadequacy. Fashion, however, no longer operates precisely as it did in Veblen’s day.³¹ First, many people today hide their wealth rather than display it. On a college campus, it is difficult to discern by appearance which students come from money. Many wealthy kids still wear overalls. Their cars reveal more, but casual clothes are the norm, except at formal events. Some rich people enjoy shopping for clothes at Target or Clothes-for-Less. One class marker is membership in certain sports such as fencing or riding horses, although other sports once associated with the rich, for example, golf and tennis, are now being played by a wider social spectrum. Despite the confusion, many people have a sharp eye for indications of class differences, which they can spot in a pair of shoes, handbag, or backpack. On a college campus similar dress may create a sense of community at the same time that class distinctions are reinforced by subtle differences in possessions. According to political theorist Nicholas Xenos in *Scarcity and Modernity*, Veblen correctly associated fashion

28. Ken Loach, “Bread and Roses,” (Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Films, 2000). See also Wendy Chapkis, *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1986), 174.

29. Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, 18.

30. Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 103–104.

31. For revisions of Veblen, see Crane, *Fashion and its Social Agendas*, and Bell, *On Human Finery*, chapter 9, “Deviations from Veblen.”

with competition and hierarchy, and rightly argued that fashionable goods are not acquired primarily for utility, but for display. Xenos amends Veblen by asserting that today competition and hierarchy are not only based on wealth, but also on style or anything else that sets one apart from others. “[T]he stylish always possess a scarce resource independently of the things themselves they make fashionable.”³² The rich and the stylish keep shifting the standards of the consumption—dress, restaurants, nightclubs, cars—to stay at the top of the fashion hierarchy. Whether based on style or on class, when fashion helps to establish social hierarchies it undermines the possibility of democratic community.

The critique of fashion as a contributing cause of social division—expressed by Rousseau, Veblen, and Xenos—is mostly valid. Social inequality is often reflected in dress and appearance, and the rich, beautiful, and fashionable commonly use clothes to lord it over social rivals. Fashion contributes to the blindness that prevents citizens from seeing each other as fellow citizens who are each worthy of respect.³³ Citizens today are much more likely to display their possessions to an envious audience than to cooperate on common projects. Democratic ties based on mutual respect, conversation, and common action are comparatively rare. People learn to judge their own social worth and that of others on the criteria of consumption, wealth, celebrity, dress, and looks, rather than their contribution to the public good.³⁴ This indictment of fashion in the Rousseau and Veblen tradition is irrefutable, but it misses other more benign political relationships that clothes create and express.

Democratic Fashion

Fashion’s elitist qualities are commonly derided, while its contribution to democracy is ignored. Either dress is considered to be a private matter, a statement of individual taste, or else people, especially the young, are criticized for rebelling against the dress of their elders, but really just conforming to an alternative fashion. Yet I will suggest that fashion does contribute to democratic culture when citizens express through clothes their social and political beliefs along with feelings of solidarity and respect. Because it would be an immense task actually to prove that fashion works in the ways that I suggest, I can only

32. Nicholas Xenos, *Scarcity and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 95. See also Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of social and cultural capital in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

33. On this use of the term “blindness” and its function as an impediment to democracy, see William James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983 [1899]).

34. The categories of conspicuous consumption and emulation are from Veblen.

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adumbrate the argument here. The following pages should be taken as the outline of an agenda for further research rather than as a complete argument.

Clothes and Solidarity

People often proclaim their allegiances—political, cultural, religious, and professional—by the way they dress. Clothes can encourage a fellow feeling, and that feeling is crucial to democratic community and common action.³⁵ Self-presentation is one means for people to show devotion to a cause or a feeling of solidarity with a group.³⁶ Although he insists that fashion is always about lording it over others, even Xenos concedes that fashion objects “serve as signs of social inclusion and individual or group demarcation. . . .”³⁷ Anne Hollander correctly argues that virtually everyone dresses to look like some public image. “[D]ressing is an act usually undertaken with reference to pictures—mental pictures, which are personally edited versions of actual ones.”³⁸ Hollander emphasizes identification with public images of beauty or masculinity that are found in art, films, or advertising, but dress ideals can also be derived from people in one’s social and professional circles, such as a friend, teacher, or boss. This process becomes politicized, although less universal, when clothes are used to express solidarity with others. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “solidarity” as “the fact or quality on the part of communities, etc., of being perfectly united or at one in some respect, esp. in interests, sympathies or aspirations. . . .” “Solidarity” implies a sense of identification. If clothes indicate the group with which one identifies, then they can foster communal bonds. Admittedly, such identification can also unite anti-democratic groups.³⁹ I am not thinking of a military uniform when I speak of common dress.

To be part of a group often entails dressing like the other people in that group. The fact that dress many times reveals allegiances is perhaps easiest to see when a person joins a new group.⁴⁰ People changing their vocation, who, for example, go from being a stockbroker to an elementary school teacher, or radically alter

35. In the 2004 Democratic Party Presidential primaries, supporters of Howard Dean identified themselves by wearing orange hats. This led some lowans to refer to them as “The Perfect Stormtroopers,” an ironic reference to a movie and the Nazis. (John Tierney, “The 2004 Campaign; Political Points/Iowa Edition,” *New York Times*, January 18, 2004).

36. Clothes can also inspire feelings of alienation. When I attend a folk festival or political demonstration, I am often put off by the “alternative” light cotton clothes, tie-dye T-shirts, and scruffy hair. My fashion identity was probably most influenced by the SNCC organizers, circa 1962, in their white T-shirts or work-shirts, and blue jeans.

37. Xenos, *Scarcity*, 92.

38. Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993 [1978]), 349.

39. See Rieff, “Aesthetic Functions,” 482.

40. See Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*.

their politics or religion, or leave home to go to college, often revise their dress.⁴¹ Members of an arts community on a high school campus usually can be easily distinguished from members of the investment club.⁴² Republican activists generally dress more conservatively than do anti-globalization protestors. In the 1960s, Black Panther Party members wore black leather jackets and full Afros, creating an image that reflected their political views, an image quite distinct from that of “mainstream” civil rights leaders Martin Luther King, Jr., Andrew Young, and John Lewis.⁴³ Fashion followed ideology.

As with most arguments about fashion, the other side seems plausible. It could be maintained that bonds based on dress are weak and superficial, and that dress can be illusory and misinterpreted so that allegiances forged by appearance could rest on misunderstandings. Perhaps genuine alliances cannot be based on clothes. “The styles themselves are as fleeting as the social encounters they mediate,” proclaims Xenos, “which is why fashion is the perfect expression of modernity.”⁴⁴ Fleeting social encounters, like those at a trendy nightclub filled with fashionable people in a big city, do not breed democracy, even if the patrons look alike and enjoy their commonality. Members of an upper-class country club in the Hamptons also take pleasure in having a similar appearance, but there is nothing democratic in it.

Even among recognizably democratic groups, made up of workers or poor people who want to unite for social action, solidarity must be based on something more substantial than dressing like others in the group. In an organization of farmers, some may wear dungarees while others sport leather jackets, but what matters, it might be claimed, are their common occupation and feelings of shared interest. Someone from the city who looks like a farmer may stumble by mistake into a local farmers’ meeting, yet have nothing except dress in common with those in the meeting.

Some will contend that dress, even if it could, should not be the basis of communion; if anything, political action should help citizens forge bonds with people who look nothing like them. Dressing like those whose political cause one admires is not much of a contribution. It would be more helpful to speak out, sign a petition, attend a demonstration, volunteer, or donate money. Those in the

41. “During the past year I . . . was arrested on a militant women’s liberation action, spent some time in jail, stopped wearing makeup and shaving my legs, started learning Karate and changed my politics completely,” wrote one transformed feminist quoted in Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 11–12.

42. Judith Martin rejects these dress prejudices, and asserts that artists should be able to dress as formally as they would like. See *Miss Manners Rescues Civilization: From Sexual Harassment, Frivolous Lawsuits, Dissing, and Other Lapses in Civility* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1996), 51.

43. See Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 95–96.

44. Xenos, *Scarcity*, 93.

group would want newcomers, who could be disguised infiltrators, to prove their loyalty in some way other than appearance.

The bonds of dress are too fragile to create democratic community, the objection continues, in part because clothes can be worn to impress, deceive, or confuse, and they might be misjudged by observers.⁴⁵ “Perhaps the most difficult aspect of sartorial communication,” Lurie suggests, “is the fact that any language that is able to convey information can also be used to convey misinformation.”⁴⁶ Some people who dress in ordinary ways have extraordinary ideas. Dressing conservatively can be a respectful method for radical thinkers to show their commonality with those who might reject them based on appearance, as in the clean-for-Gene movement when hippies shaved, cut their hair short, and adopted mainstream dress while working for the Eugene McCarthy presidential campaign in 1968. A more common reason for manipulating appearance is exemplified by some rap artists who recently have adopted more mainstream clothing styles in order to better market their lines of merchandise.

Andre 3000, the avant-garde half of OutKast, now favors seersucker pants, saddle shoes and Brooks Brothers blazers. Big Boi, the hardcore half of the duo, is now partial to 1970s inspired tuxedos and has cut his signature, shoulder-length hair. Some like Nas and Ja Rule have scaled back on the bling.

“It’s not cool walking around with five chains on anymore when I’m approaching 30,” Ja Rule said. In a line from his new song “What More Can I Say,” Jay-Z, who recently said he was retiring from rap, says: “I don’t wear jerseys/I’m 30 plus/gimmie a crisp pair of jeans” and “button-ups.” Button-up is slang for an oxford shirt.⁴⁷

I have seen an elegant man in a fine suit sitting in the college library who appeared to be a wealthy member of the college’s Board of Trustees. Upon closer observation I realized that he was scouring the want ads; apparently he was out of work. At the rural University of California, Santa Cruz, in the early 1970s, students from the hills of Los Angeles often exchanged their city fashions for country garb at the local Goodwill. Many suburban boys dress like gangsta rappers before heading off to ivy-league colleges. Sometimes dress identification has content—alienated men in the 1950s may have dressed like James Dean because they took him to be a social rebel—while at other times a particular look just seems “cool,”

45. Norton discusses “playful dressing” in *Republic of Signs*, 61. See also Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, 355.

46. Lurie, *Language of Clothes*, 24.

47. Lola Ogunnaike, “Sweeten the Image, Hold the Bling-Bling; Eyeing Mainstream Success, Rappers Clean Up Their Act and Cultivate Their Philanthropy,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2004.

and the imitator is not trying to express any social or political ideals in their dress. Clothing messages can also be misinterpreted. In the 1970s, I was startled to meet men with long hair and beards who hated hippies and supported the war in Vietnam.⁴⁸ Obviously, there is far less coherence in the language of dress now than there was in the nineteenth century. Then, one could look at people and quickly judge their social position. Now it is hit or miss.

In short, it is reasonable to suggest that clothes do not create strong, effective bonds for political action, in part because they can be worn misleadingly and be misread. The truth in this statement can be conceded without demolishing my central point. Deception, playfulness, and misinterpretation are fundamental aspects of the phenomenon of appearance, but they are not the whole of it. Often one's exterior does indicate class, profession, ideology, and sexual orientation.⁴⁹ In 1984, while on my first teaching assignment, I put on my hippest clothes and went to the White Eagle Tavern, a dance hall in Portland, Oregon. While having a drink at the bar, I tried to strike up a conversation with the woman sitting next to me. Her first words to me were, "What's a professor doing in a place like this?" How did she know?⁵⁰ My point is that many people, consciously or unconsciously, look like others in their group or the group to which they aspire. Many people do express their affinities, social roles, and loyalties through their clothes. Dress often provides accurate information about a person's wealth, ethnic identification, sexuality, and even political affiliations. Shared appearance can foster a common feeling, and that feeling might stimulate common action.

I have argued that people often dress differently based on ideology and politics, and imitating our allies' dress advances political action to some degree. While there may be legitimate objections to my arguments—clothes are a flimsy basis for alliances; clothes can be misleading and therefore make for illusory associations; political commitment requires more than looking like others—I have replied by insisting that clothes sometimes express a strong feeling of connectedness with others, a feeling that can generate common action.

Political Expression

I have so far described two types of political relationships fostered by clothes: inequality and solidarity. Another kind of civic tie is created by the political messages that emanate from clothes. Begin with the idea that clothing is a form of

48. The present-day confusion in dress is a relatively recent phenomenon. Veblen accurately depicted a close association between dress and class in nineteenth-century America. In Veblen's day the issue of disguises was less prevalent because generally dress conformed to social class. In *Fashion and Its Social Agendas*, Diana Crane traces the development of anarchy in dress and appearance.

49. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, is crucial on this point.

50. On the other hand, as a visiting professor at Reed College, students told me that they guessed I was a political conservative because I wore a tie and jacket while teaching.

expression; in their clothes, people convey vague or explicit messages—political, sexual, religious, and economic—all the time.⁵¹ Although fashion is often meaningless, one can state through a campaign button, words on a T-shirt, clothing style, haircut, tattoos, and piercings how one feels about authority, conventional behavior, political candidates, and the boundaries of race and gender.⁵² These fashion statements loosely join citizens in a sort of political conversation and can instigate such conversations.

Admittedly, communicating through clothes is inarticulate. People wearing a cross around their necks could be trying to spread the Gospel or just sporting a fashionable symbol. No matter what the message, it is not based on reason or dialogue.⁵³ So in what sense can clothes be said to create political relationships? Conveying a message through a haircut, say, while parading down a city street is nothing like the Athenian assembly engaged in debate. And yet, while it would be good to bring back something like the Athenian assembly and the New England town meeting, which would create opportunities for actual discussion among citizens about politics, public policy, and values, it should be admitted that in the contemporary world clothes offer an opportunity for expression to a significant number of people, even if that voice has a limited range of things to say and only speaks to a small audience.⁵⁴ Again, if the choice were the re-creation of Athens in America, or clothing-as-speech, I would choose Athens, but in our world there are few outlets for public conversation about important issues. Talk radio, letters-to-the-editor, city council meetings, and candidate forums give some citizens a public voice, but these are clearly insufficient to constitute democratic debate. The voices of professional journalists, politicians, and a handful of academics dominate the mass media. On the other hand, everyone—particularly young and radical activists—can express their ideas through their clothes, music, and art.

There is a dialogic quality to the visual world, even if “wordless dialogue” is a contradiction in terms. Individuals live in a world in which they make and receive statements expressed through clothes. This is particularly true in a democracy, which allows wide latitude for visual displays in public places. The person who sends clothing messages also receives messages from others. I once saw a big bearded man on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village who walked briskly down the street wearing a tight, short black dress, fishnet stockings, and high heels. Perhaps he was protesting restrictive gender roles, but in order for him to appear radical, the rest of us have to dress more conservatively. He needed us, even in the Village, both as an audience and as a context. Mainstream dressers

51. This point is elaborated at length in Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*.

52. See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1991) and Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*

53. Judith Martin, *Miss Manners Rescues Civilization*, 50.

54. See Norton, *Republic of Signs*, 65–66.

constantly send out clothing messages that affirm traditional gender roles. Cross-dressers are not just making statements, but are taking part in a cultural conversation.

I am labeling as a democratic relationship the inarticulate exchange of worldviews conveyed by clothing. Despite the efforts of repressive regimes, women and men should be able to dress more or less as they please and young people should be able to challenge a regime through their appearance. For many people, appearance is the only vehicle used to present their outlooks, however anti-democratic those outlooks may be, to fellow citizens. Although communication by clothing messages is not a substitute for genuine political debate, the fact that many people use clothes to express their outlook on life makes fashion a potentially democratic medium in its implicit invitation to dialogue. In order to preserve the democratic dimension of communication via clothes, however, free expression should be accompanied by mutual respect.

Respectful Dress and Respect for Dress

The democratic ideal of mutual respect has at least two implications for dress. One is that people should generally accept, even appreciate, a wide range of others' dress choices; the second calls on people to dress with sensitivity toward one's potential audience. Democratic respect might be defined by McWilliams's conception of democratic civility: "[C]ivility does not require that I adopt your manners, your creed, or your costume. It does demand the empathetic effort to understand you and your ways as you understand them yourself. Civility, like equality, is the sameness of spirit that does not require us to deny our differences."⁵⁵ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "respect" means "to give heed, attention, or consideration to something. . ." Also, "respect" implies a "deferential regard or esteem felt or shown towards a person or thing. . . The condition or state of being esteemed or honoured." One difference between aristocratic societies and democratic ones is that in a democracy nearly everyone is thought to merit some sort of respect.⁵⁶

Respectful dressing implies a "due regard" for the feelings that one's dress might provoke in others. Such regard is appropriate to a multicultural society because individuals should be aware of how different people might perceive them. Young people, especially those raised in liberal families where free expression is encouraged, should realize that some people find aspects of their dress provocative or offensive. Dress should not be legislated based on the

55. Quoted in Peter Dennis Bathory and Nancy L. Schwartz, eds. *Friends and Citizens: Essays in Honor of Wilson Carey McWilliams* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 7.

56. For another discussion of democratic respect, see my *Democratic Temperament: the Legacy of William James* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997), 54–80.

sensitivities of others, but those sensitivities should be acknowledged and considered. Respect comes mostly in considering, not conforming to, the reactions of others. People whose dressing or undressing is likely to upset people should do it consciously and deliberately. To provoke others consciously implies that one has tried to recognize others' attitudes and sensitivities, taking them into account. One might then say, "I know my parents will be upset by this nose ring, but upsetting them is exactly what I want to do." One should be conscious of the possible effect of one's appearance upon various others; then, in public places of little religious or ceremonial significance one can, of course, dress more or less as one chooses.⁵⁷

Some people might want more restrictions on dress. How can it be respectful to set aside the sensitivities of others? Surely, some situations—such as a wedding, funeral, citizenship ceremony, and, depending on local custom, religious service—place restrictions on dress. Visitors to Harlem churches are asked not to wear casual clothes because it is disrespectful to the parishioners. Tourists at religious shrines in the Middle East are requested not to wear scanty or sloppy dress. Even liberal high schools try to limit, because they are disruptive, intense displays of sexuality along with obscenities or hate speech on clothes. Some college professors grimace when students wear baseball caps in the classroom. They may be thinking of the etiquette rule that "Gentlemen, even very young ones, must still remove their hats as a sign of respect."⁵⁸ Veblen takes etiquette to be a set of useless rules that reveals snobbery and excessive leisure, but he misses the intersection of etiquette and respect.⁵⁹ Acting courteously toward others is a way to show them respect.

One key element in respectful attitudes toward dress is to embrace diversity. This is the answer to the objection that commonality based on dress divides the greater community. Some might argue that if similar dress reinforces a bond among a particular sub-group a larger community allegiance will be undermined. This might be easy to see in a high school that is divided into antagonistic cliques such as jocks, preps, Goths, gang members, or "granolas." The hostility generated by such divisions, expressed in dress, might provoke the school administration to adopt school uniforms.

While the problem of splintering is real, sub-groups, for the most part, should be accepted rather than abolished. The trouble with uniforms is that they seek to promote similarity among citizens rather than encouraging unity among those who are different. This is why the recent French proposal to ban Muslim

57. Nudity is almost universally restricted in public settings in the United States, except for the beach, and there it is often contested.

58. *Ms. Manners Rescues Civilization*, 45–47.

59. Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 47–49.

headscarves is wrongheaded.⁶⁰ French President Jacques Chirac endorsed the proposal, saying, “In all conscience, I believe that the wearing of dress or symbols that conspicuously show religious affiliation should be banned in schools. . . . The Islamic veil—whatever name we give it—the yarmulke and a cross that is of plainly excessive dimensions: these have no place inside public schools.”⁶¹ Chirac hopes to solve problems of national unity by prohibiting diverse dress, but instead, students and citizens should be encouraged to explore and understand differences within the community, symbolized by dress. Assuming that dress indicates group loyalties and identities, then we should welcome various groups and their dress, including the turban, burka, headscarf, yarmulke, dreadlocks, piercings, taboos, sexy dress, and even Polo. Admittedly, the community and even the nation require some degree of unity, but that unity should not be achieved through dress.⁶²

The concept of respectful dress encounters several problems:

1. In the area of dress, the notion of democracy-as-respect appears to conflict with ideas of democracy-as-individual expression and democracy-as-political-speech. Many people reject the idea that dress should be “respectful.” Although people commonly judge the clothes of others to be inappropriate for certain settings, for example, too informal, revealing, or sloppy, most people in the United States probably think that usually people should dress as they please. Unless parents are dressing young children, principals creating regulations for students in high school, or employers creating a dress code for their workers, no one, it is thought, should dictate what other people wear.⁶³

Yet when politically or sexually provocative dress offends some people, should respect for others’ negative reactions be valued more highly than creativity and individual freedom? Does respectful dress require acquiescence in repression? Is it “respectful” for an airline attendant to wear dreadlocks? Should the feelings of those who find that hairstyle offensive even be taken into account? Should men remove their earrings because some people are affronted? Which should triumph: offended feelings or freedom of expression? Who should be respected when some people in a given audience are disturbed by the others’ appearance? Should visitors respect the dress of their hosts or the hosts their visitors? Should American women soldiers in Muslim countries be required to adopt the dress of the women who live there, out of respect for the local culture, or should the dress

60. Elaine Sciolino, “Ban Religious Attire in School, French Panel Says,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2003.

61. Elaine Sciolino, “Chirac Backs Law to Keep Signs of Faith Out of School,” *New York Times*, December 18, 2003.

62. Rieff in “Aesthetic Functions in Modern Politics,” argues that “discursive values” should replace fashion, particularly uniforms, as the unifying agent among citizens (480).

63. Even more would say that the subject is trivial, and basically it does not matter what people wear.

preferences of the women soldiers be tolerated? Should religious Muslims forgo the veil in France because some in the Christian majority will be alienated? Does “respect” boil down to “give no offense to the most censorious onlooker”? Would that not create bland dressing and give undue power to the narrowest tastes?

2. In a related problem, the question is: How does respect apply to religious based dictates of modesty and gender roles? It is one thing to ask all men to cover their heads when entering an Orthodox Jewish synagogue, but if someone on the beach finds a skimpy bikini disgraceful, should the wearer cover up? Some of this conflict can be resolved by understanding that different spaces are appropriate for different types of dress; for example, a synagogue or mosque is one type of place and the beach another. Certain religious neighborhoods pose a harder problem since presumably the sidewalks are public space and everyone is free to dress as they wish, but is provocative dress appropriate or disrespectful there?

3. In a multicultural society, when there are so many groups of others, how can one present oneself with “a due regard for the feelings” of all people? Dress that is appropriate in one sub-community may appear disrespectful in another. Provocative dress in small-town Kansas, I assume, would be demure in Los Angeles. Surely, any concept of respectful dressing must allow for regional and cultural differences. But if Los Angelenos travel, for whatever reason, to rural Kansas, should they not be aware of the reactions that they are getting (and *vice versa*)?

I have no fixed answer to these questions, but they should be discussed publicly, and that discussion rarely occurs. In the workplace and school, regulations are imposed from the top down. Elsewhere in civil society, offense is given and taken, but not talked about publicly. Respectful dress should not, except in rare circumstances, be imposed or made subject to legislation.⁶⁴ Without laws, codes, or coercion, respect for others should be a consideration for dressing in a democratic society. People should be aware, to the extent possible, of the effect that their appearance has upon others. The reason not to call for something stronger than “due regard” is to preserve other positive aspects of democratic dress, that is, free expression of ideas and of sexuality, creativity, solidarity, and political expression.

Conclusion

Meditating on the intersection of fashion and democracy reveals contradictory tendencies in democratic culture. Clearly, fashion still serves, as it did in Rousseau’s and then Veblen’s day to divide citizens, marking and exacerbating

64. Obviously, the topic of hate speech and its regulation are relevant here, but that subject is too broad to broach within the confines of this essay.

incessant social competition. Without denying that function, I have tried in this essay to describe other, less commonly noted dimensions of fashion, which could contribute to the creation of genuine democracy. To see the democratic dimension of fashion, one must begin by realizing that dress is embedded in the social world. While dress involves individual expression, that expression does not occur in isolation. One's own dress is influenced by the appearance of others (even if those others are not geographically proximate); one dresses to be seen by others (this is true even of those who say that they are dressing only for themselves); if one is making an ideological statement through one's dress, an audience must receive that statement. To negotiate these different messages and reactions, and to create meaningful dialogue and common action, democratic dress often may be lively, loud, sexy, provocative, and even offensive. Democratic dress needs to strike a balance among creativity, political expression, solidarity, moderation in displays of wealth, and respect for the appearance and the sensitivities of others. Although democracy in the United States will not be wrecked by fashion, and neither will fashion be its salvation, a democratic culture, including fashion, might aid in creating a democratic politics.