

# Dress codes can reveal social aspirations, political ideals, says scholar

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From the opulent clothes worn by the French King Louis XIV to the “Sunday Best” attire activists wore during civil rights protests, to the now ubiquitous “Zoom” shirt worn during the pandemic, Stanford legal scholar Richard Thompson Ford examines how the rules of fashion run parallel to important transformations in history. Credit: Andrew Brodhead

For centuries, dress codes have been used to maintain specific social roles and hierarchies. But fashion and style have also traditionally served another purpose: to express new ideals of individual liberty, rationality and equality, according to new research by Stanford legal scholar Richard Thompson Ford.

Civil rights activists in 1960s America wore their "Sunday Best" at protests to demonstrate they were worthy of dignity and respect as they challenged the institutions that kept Black people at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Centuries earlier, during the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, a pared-down business suit symbolized a departure from the status-based opulence of previous aristocratic regimes. Wearing the same clothes as everyone else, regardless of one's social status, was a way of espousing the period's new values, such as sensibility, rationality and even equality, said Ford.

"It's worth noting that the Black Panthers had a Minister of Culture, so they saw very clearly the importance of aesthetics in changing politics," Ford said. "That developed into the 'Black is beautiful movement' which focused quite explicitly on the political dimensions of racial aesthetics and changed dominant norms of beauty in order to incorporate and reflect the norms of the black community."

Here, Ford talks about some of this research with Stanford News Service. Ford is the George E. Osborne Professor of Law at Stanford Law School.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**In your research, you argue that running parallel to a history of fashion is a history of liberal individualism. Can you explain that further?**

In the modern sense, fashion involves clothing that is highly expressive; it can be a sign of individual personality. This kind of clothing emerged around the same time as the ideal of individualism began to emerge in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Clothing reflected new social and political ideals: the importance of the individual as opposed to the group-based statuses of aristocratic class and religious affinity. Fashion in this sense developed alongside other changes in the arts, philosophy and science: literature began to focus on individual psychology more than grand classical epics, prefiguring the transformation from epic to the novel. Philosophy and science put humans at the center of the cosmos, displacing a religious sensibility that subordinated human and earthly concerns to the divine and supernatural. Portraiture became expressive of individual personality. These changes in aesthetic sensibility eventually became part of liberal political ideology, that put the individual before the monarch or the church.

Fashion not only reflected these changes—it also may have helped to shape them by conditioning people to think of themselves first and foremost as unique individuals. In a sense, fashion lets people not only express their individuality but also experience it on their bodies.

## **Can you offer an example of how fashion reveals the politics of an era?**

One example is the development of the business suit. As late as the early 1700s, the typical clothing for someone of high status in most of European society was opulent and adorned with things like brocade and jewels—this was true for men and women. This type of clothing signified status and aristocratic rank and a high place in society.

But as early as in the 17th century, things were beginning to change. In England, this involved the execution of King Charles I, who styled

himself as an absolute monarch, and the rise of the Commonwealth. After the Commonwealth ended, the monarchy was restored but the old absolutist ambitions of the monarch didn't come back. Instead, what emerged was a new kind of aristocracy in which the aristocrats—the people with a high place in society—dressed in a more toned down, subtle and utilitarian fashion.

There was a transformation during this period, which the psychologist John Carl Flügel later described as "the great masculine renunciation." This was a renunciation of all of the opulence, jewels and brocade that defined the showy clothing of the past era. A new, pared-down aesthetic became the beginnings of the business suit which over time became a symbol of liberal individualism. At the time, people made the connection between the sparer, toned down suit and the ideals of human rights.

Another thing that the business suit accomplished was it created a kind of egalitarian uniform in which people of a variety of social statuses wore, more or less, the same clothing—this was new. Now, everyone from the most powerful heads of state to bank clerks wear business suits. That social leveling of attire symbolized and went along with—and even inspired and helped people to act out—the political ideal of formal equality before the law.

## **So that was for men. What about for women?**

The story for women is longer and more complicated. During the same period [that saw the evolution of the business suit], menswear and womenswear diverged. As menswear got more streamlined with fewer extravagant details, womenswear got more opulent. In a sense, women almost compensated for the lack of opulent display by getting more of that for themselves. One might even say that men still engaged in opulent fashion vicariously through women.

Womenswear doesn't participate in an evolution toward egalitarian norms until much, much later. And indeed, one of the stories I tell in the book is the way that this emergence of liberal egalitarianism goes hand in hand, and in some ways, deepens gender hierarchies, that in terms of clothing and attire, lasted well into the 20th century.

To give one example, while European men abandoned draped attire, which was the attire (characteristic of the ancient world) in the 14th and 15th centuries, women remained draped below the waist until the early 20th century. In the early 1900s, a woman wearing trousers might be subject to arrest for public indecency. For a long time in history, adventurous women would mimic parts of masculine style to express or assert their right to enjoy masculine prerogatives, whether it was masculine freedoms or masculine assertion of power. So, a woman wearing some element of menswear was a provocation and adopted by women on the avant-garde.

## **How is fashion intertwined with activism?**

Fashion has played an important role in social activism for centuries. Sometimes that role has been as explicit: a social activist fighting against the power structure. Other times, it is more subtle. In the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance people resisted what were called "sumptuary laws," which were designed to assign people in society a particular type of clothing that would express their social status.

They did so not so much as a direct political challenge to the power structure, but certainly as an indirect one. When a wealthy merchant or tradesperson adopted high-status attire, they weren't necessarily trying to usurp the position of the nobility or bring down social hierarchies, but it was a way of saying "We deserve the same degree of social prestige and respect as the aristocracy and nobility. We are asserting our own status in society." This was a new idea and one that turned out to be very

challenging to the power structure and the status quo. Although those people may not have thought of themselves as activists, they were engaging in a form of activism.

During the racial justice movement in the 1950s and 1960s civil rights activists went to protest at lunch counters or to conduct public marches, there was a dress code. People were expected to wear their "Sunday Best" in order to demonstrate that they deserved dignity and respect. But importantly, it was also a direct challenge to a white supremacist power structure that endeavored to keep [black people](#) at the bottom of the social hierarchy. There were laws in the United States at times that required Black people and slaves to dress in clothing that was considered appropriate to their status—which was the lowest status. For Black people to dress in a manner that was elegant and refined was a challenge to that type of power structure and that's also part of what was going on with the Sunday best attire in the civil rights struggle.

Later, a new generation of [civil rights activists](#) rejected "Sunday Best" attire as the politics of respectability. They adopted new styles that were suited to a new style of activism. Black Panthers wore black leather jackets and turtlenecks, berets and sunglasses. It was quasi-military but also it was a new visual statement designed to express a different kind of resistance to the status quo and a different type of racial pride—one that didn't borrow from the symbols of the white bourgeoisie but instead constructed a new black aesthetic.

## **How do you see dress codes changing, given the new world we are currently living in?**

These things can always be somewhat hard to predict, but one area where I'm fairly confident we're going to see changes in dress codes is around norms of gender. We're already seeing such dramatic changes in

terms of the recognition of the transgender community and people who are gender non-binary. That's a remarkable challenge to a centuries-old set of conventions in which men's and women's clothing diverged and were considered to be symbolic opposites. I think that is going to be fascinating to watch develop and I'm not sure exactly whether it will develop into something of a more unisex style of clothing or whether it will simply be a remixing and reconfiguring of the gender binary.

Another interesting area is post pandemic and what happens to the norms of workplace attire in the era of the Zoom call. First, there was the idea of the "Zoom shirt" that hangs at the back of their chair and is put on right before the meeting and presumably, for the rest of the day they're wearing sweatpants, pajamas, or something like that because we're all stuck at home.

But interestingly, another thing that developed was a kind of subtle new dress code that involved, not the clothing itself, but what was behind you in the room and how one should style the background of their Zoom call in order to communicate messages. That is very much like a different kind of dress code but your kitchen, dining room or living room are part of that public persona.

## **What inspired this research?**

I teach employment discrimination and civil rights law and a surprising number of legal disputes have involved people challenging a dress code of some kind. For instance, women challenging workplace dress codes that required high heels or makeup or people of color challenging dress codes that outlawed preferred hairstyles that are suitable to the texture of their hair, like braids or locks.

Another thing that was very striking to me about these complaints was the intensity with which people fought the dress codes. People were

willing to lose their jobs disputing workplace dress code and meanwhile, employers were willing to lose a valued employee trying to impose such a [dress code](#). I wanted to understand why people felt so strongly about clothing, fashion and self-presentation.

The second reason is more personal. I grew up interested in fashion based on the influence of my father who actually trained as a tailor. This was at a time when African Americans often learned both a profession and a trade—the idea was they would have a trade to fall back on in case racial exclusion kept them from the profession of their choice. He never actually worked as a tailor but he learned the craft and he understood the importance of high-quality clothing. He also deeply internalized the importance of self-presentation, which was especially important for a black man growing up during the era of Jim Crow and in the era just after our civil rights laws were passed, where overt racial prejudice was still common and racial stereotypes everywhere. I saw for him how important it was to present himself in a manner that was dignified, refined and reflected his own sense of self, but also what he needed in order to negotiate a still fairly hostile society.

Provided by Stanford University

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