

BOOK REVIEWS

ROSS, ROBERT. *Clothing. A Global History. Or, the Imperialists' New Clothes*. Polity, Cambridge [etc.] 2008. 221 pp. Ill. £15.99; doi:10.1017/S0020859009990484

Clothing languished in the academic closet for generations following the formalization of university research over a century ago; the subject of everyday attire was disregarded or despised as an object of serious study until more recent years. However, over the past several decades scholars of various disciplines have revealed the tremendous value in studying clothing and fashion, dynamic interrelated topics. The history of clothing offers unique insights into economic and social development, gender norms, community priorities, and global interactions in ways perhaps surprising to those not familiar with this theme. Subsumed within the seemingly banal getting, wearing, and fashioning of garments lay great economic, cultural and political forces that tied the impulses and strategies of individuals and communities to larger events. At the same time, the local, in all its variety, played out in the evolution of clothing over time.

Robert Ross comes to the question of clothing from the field of South African history; one of his more recent works addresses nineteenth-century status and respectability, a topic infused with contemporary debates about forms of display. Ross now considers global transformations in clothing, among the most visible being the spread of Western-style modes from the seventeenth century and through the colonial and post-colonial eras. The globalization of apparel is exemplified in a recent photograph of political leaders mirroring the considerable heterogeneity in their apparel. However, this volume is no simplistic litany of globalization focused on Western agency and non-Western victimhood. Ross insists that: “what people wear, like what they believe, can only in part be imposed from above, or outside” (p. 4). He also allows “the subjects of our enquiries the benefit of free will” (p. 169). Ross’s ambition is to uncover the long-term patterns in clothing production, use, meaning, and exchange across a global terrain and many centuries. Ross succeeds admirably in this task, producing a fascinating synthesis, reflecting the richness of research in virtually all regions of the world.

This is a timely addition to the field of global history. For while individual articles in global history have focused on elements of material transformation, including aspects of clothing, recent global history surveys have lagged behind with often little or no attention given to issues of consumerism or fashion, despite the critical role of consumer demand in driving global contact in the pre-modern and modern eras. For example, early modern global trade in Asian manufactures dramatically affected the material environment of many societies including Europe. Clothing was significantly reshaped as a result. Ironically, some of the first (and most repeated) pieces of European sumptuary legislation focused on Asian textiles and similarly disruptive foreign luxuries, catalysts of economic and social change.

Ross begins with such regulations, noting the propensity of societies to set rules of attire – Europe was far from unique in this. From the general Ross moves to the particular, dissecting the patterns of European response to forces of change. Legislative

prescriptions in matters of personal display ultimately gave way before the power of fashion, which not only tolerated but also celebrated the potential of individual material creativity. Tensions persisted on this question through much of Europe until the 1800s. Undoubtedly, variability in apparel presented challenges to social hierarchy as the newly enriched revised the formulation of style. Indeed, the particular value in focusing on clothing is that it reveals the creative pressures in many segments of society, as the priorities of apparel were reconceived. Ultimately, the economic benefits of popular fashion were widely recognized and this fact became the pervasive ethos of north-west Europe. Regulation could not constrain material ambition, and in due course philosophers gave voice to this sensibility, while European industries geared up and colonial traders set sail to provide the substance for this great redressing.

This volume is organized along well-worn lines in some respects, with chapters proceeding through Western industrial growth, colonial contacts, and imperial projects. Christian missionaries are considered along with modernization projects as in Russia and Japan, with discussions of the new ideals of the national body and sanctioned apparel as focal points. These topics are followed by assessments of the complex histories of national dress across a range of communities, some as living symbols of anti-colonial struggles. Despite the common chronological headings, the thematic focus on clothing opens up a course of human endeavour much less familiar to most students of history and uniquely engaging. Ross offers a sophisticated and very readable treatment, with great historical movements and smaller regional campaigns revealed through the shifting fabrics and politics of clothing.

From sumptuary legislation and the rise of fashion in Europe, Ross next explains how Europe succeeded in dressing great numbers in newly standardized forms. This facet of industrial growth was an off-shoot of early modern militarization and state construction. The hundreds of thousands of men in the growing military had to be provided with functional and uniform apparel, beginning in the wars of the 1600s and greatly augmented by the Napoleonic Wars. The techniques of sub-contracting, allied with masses of (predominantly female) sweated outworkers set a pattern of clothing production in place that would remain virtually unchanged for centuries, even with the advent of the sewing machine later in the nineteenth century. Using these technologies of production, clothing was readily available for military, urban and colonial populations. These production patterns were replicated in North American cities like New York for more distant continental hinterlands.

The industrialization of textile production was the second ingredient of this equation, beginning first in Britain and then repeated throughout the West and beyond. Industrialization deluged all parts of the world market with cheap cotton cloth and bales of clothing, especially after 1850, offering alternatives to indigenous hide, fur, or cloth garb in colonial settings across the globe. The scale of this intervention is noteworthy: "By the 1840s, the British were exporting 10 yards of cloth a year for every inhabitant of the [South American] continent" (p. 71).

One of the main features of this volume is Ross's careful dissection of the shifting clothing regimes across a range of cultures, beginning outside Europe with the first colonial encounters in the Americas, the Indian subcontinent, and the islands of what is now Indonesia. Missionary and commercial impulses later brought Westerners and their goods into most corners of the globe. As Ross illustrates, however, this globalizing force was not the ultimate determinant of local practice. The arrival of factory-made cloth and ready-made clothes began a process of complex negotiation where the status quo was rarely an option. Changes ensued. Yet, for example, missionaries' priorities could not in

themselves construct a new clothing regime. There was a selective acceptance, rejection and reinterpretation of Western idioms of dress in which the concerns of local populations played critical roles. Indeed, the opportunities presented by the greater choices of clothing confounded some missionaries, many of who decried the new fashions being crafted among their congregants. In the nineteenth century, for example, crinolines were contentious in some South African mission communities. But as one cleric remarked: “[...] if I prohibited them from wearing crinolines, she would convert to the English Church, where nobody would care about that” (p. 97). Ultimately, most regions experienced a profound revision of previous sartorial practices, resulting in the invention and re-invention of new traditions in dress.

Clothing is a visible and meaning-laden “social skin”,¹ and as such reflects notions of appropriate gender norms in all cultures. Ross explores the sometimes explosive reactions that followed when women changed their clothes. Their choices were a rhetorical statement, whether for greater autonomy, in support of modernity, or in defiance of prescription. Riots and organized assaults were two of the penalties routinely meted out where custom was challenged by stylish women, a pattern of punishment repeated over centuries and across continents. More recently the return to veiling, or the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women, has sparked controversy. Ross places this phenomenon within wider debates about clothing and its role in expressing national or religious identities, framing anti-Western sentiment, or defining personal modesty. Here, too, women’s chosen apparel is a lightning rod for political tensions. In Western nations, a discreetly draped piece of cloth has become the catalyst for legislation, dispute, and occasional affrays, as alternative modernities are negotiated.

Some years ago Peter Burke challenged historians to think again about “consumption and the world of goods”, a phenomenon that, at that time, was framed predominantly within a Western historiography. Burke noted that, “Historians of Europe will never be able to say what is specifically western unless they look outside the west.”² In the fifteen years since the appearance of that publication, studies of the material world have broadened far beyond the North Atlantic focus of that volume. Ross employs the products of this scholarly labour to craft a compelling synthesis of the making and meanings of clothing, a critical consumer commodity. He places the histories of disparate world regions within a larger global framework, a project of immense value to students, instructors, and researchers in many fields. In such an ambitious project some specialists may note the absence of topics they wish had been included or regions deserving of more attention – there was certainly a wider adoption of Asian and indigenous North American Indian forms of dress by Western communities than is recognized here. Yet the necessary editing in no way compromises a volume that integrates a wide swath of history and a diverse assemblage of actors, identifying major thematic processes in the transformation of the world. This new-style global history is an important model of its kind.

Beverly Lemire

1. T. Turner, “The Social Skin”, in C.B. Burroughs and J.D. Ehrenreich (eds), *Reading the Social Body* (Iowa City, IA, 1993).

2. Peter Burke, “*Res et verba*: Conspicuous Consumption in the Early Modern World”, in J. Brewer and R. Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993), p. 148.