

Stitched Up: The Anti-Capitalist Book of Fashion

Review Number: 1788

Publish date: Thursday, 2 July, 2015

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ISBN: 9780745334561

Date of Publication: 2014

Price: £15.00

Pages: 264pp.

Publisher: Pluto

Publisher url: <http://www.plutobooks.com/display.asp?K=9780745334561>

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Esther Leslie

A stitch up is a devious act that someone does to someone else. It may involve putting a person or organization, perhaps, in a position where they will be blamed for something they did not do or it might mean manipulating a situation, in unseen ways, to one's own advantage. The metaphor may well come from needlework and tailoring, as does the phrase 'sewn up' – to have a situation sewn up, such that nothing can upset the way in which things should turn out. Stitched up, sewn up – the results are predictable and not liable to change, like a finished garment, whose hems, fastenings and seams are completed. Tansy E. Hoskins takes this phrase as the title for her book which is an exposure of the brutal practices of the contemporary fashion industry. It is a partisan book, as its subtitle, 'The Anti-Capitalist Book of Fashion', suggests. Anti-capitalist thinking here, presumably, does not 'stitch up' the fashion system, accusing it of things it has not done, but rather reveals fashion and its industry to be a system of stitching up its consumers, its workers, its media, its raw materials. So many victims have been stitched up by this industry, and the more each knows about the communality of suffering, the better positioned the targets are to tear it up and off. The case against the fashion industry (and not fashion, per se) levelled in the book aims to be definitive, that is to say sewn up. And it stitches together disparate parts of the fashion industry, to show how it works comprehensively as a system of exploitation and oppression, from the cultivation of the cotton seedling to the clothes hanging in the wardrobe, and through every link in a highly capitalised chain, borne by humans, animals and nature alike, from environmental to social to psychological damage.

Fashion is, as Hoskins asserts, a child of capitalism, indeed its 'favourite' one (p. 9). Capitalism needs constant novelty, in order to keep sales buoyant. Fashion delivers this, or better, epitomises this constant churn, this production and consumption as if there were no tomorrow. The costs of fashion's delivery to consumers are immense in human and resource terms. To understand this, argues Hoskins, it is necessary to place things within a framework that understands cost – that is economy – as a fundamental concern, but also which links such cost to social relations, to human lives and nature's existence. Such a framework is Marxism. There are repeated references to Marx and Marxist economics in *Stitched Up*, but Hoskins, less concerned with historical matters than producing a polemic about the present, does not set out to explore the resources that Marx himself provides for understanding how intimately fashion and capitalism have co-existed from the very beginning. Her story begins with the arrival of the mass market in the 20th century, and yet it is instructive to look at how fashion is in various ways at the core of Marx's political economy of

the 19th century. In Marx, the mode of production, that is, the unity of productive forces and the relations of production, combines with the rhythms of fashion: fashion's pattern of seasonal and also arbitrary change accompanies the breakneck pace and whimsicality of industrial capitalist production, which *Capital* indicts with the following words: 'The murderous, meaningless caprices of fashion'.⁽¹⁾ These lead to the employing and dismissing of workers at whim, and are linked to the general 'anarchy' of capitalist production. Marx mentions 'the season' with its 'sudden placing of large orders that have to be executed in the shortest possible time'.⁽²⁾ This intensifies with the development of railways and telegraphs. Marx quotes a manufacturer on purchasers who travel fortnightly from Glasgow, Manchester, and Edinburgh to the wholesale warehouses supplied by his factory. Instead of buying from stock as before, they give small orders requiring immediate execution: 'Years ago we were always able to work in the slack times, so as to meet demand of the next season, but now no-one can say beforehand what will be the demand then'.⁽³⁾ Employment and livelihood are dependent on fashion's vagaries. Impermanence, the speed of change, is crucial in the years in which the factory system of capitalism generalises itself and powers an Industrial Revolution, as is graphically illustrated in the procedures of the artist Gustave Caillebotte who, in a portrait of a couple, leaves the woman's dress unsketched until the last moment, in order to make the fashions as up to the minute as possible. Even so, by the time it reaches the gallery, it will have become historic.

Not simply analogue to the rhythm of the capitalist mode of production, fashion – or clothing and its rapid turnover – is, for Marx, the very generator of the industrial revolution, even prior to the emergence of the mass market for fashion. Marx begins *Capital* with an analysis of material – of linen, which he will analyse all through the first part of capital as a use value, an exchange value, a commodity, an abstract form and a concrete one. And from this scrap of material Marx derives the entire economic – and social, and political and aesthetic – system of capitalism, which surrounded him and into whose future his thoughts were directed. This system rests on material worked by humans into garments. The textile industry inaugurates the factory system of exploitation (twists of etymology mean that the German word for factory – *Fabrik* – is the English word for woven or otherwise processed cloth – fabric.) In the cotton mills of mid-19th-century Britain, men, women, and children graft cheaply, six days a week, spinning, bleaching, and dyeing materials harvested by slaves in the US. Working conditions were harsh. Girls in the bleaching drying-rooms of the mid-19th century, for example, were subjected daily to scorching temperatures of 100 degrees Fahrenheit. They were jammed together, 15 or so bodies, in a tiny room by a hot stove, drying linen and cambric and working late into the night, day after day. Phthisis, bronchitis, irregularity of uterine functions, hysteria in its most aggravated forms and rheumatism were common complaints, according to a report in 1862, though, Marx notes, 'capital, in its representations to parliament, had painted them as rubicund and healthy, in the manner of Rubens'.⁽⁴⁾ The shock of Hoskins' book is not that this happened once, nor that it continues, but that it is even worse today, and happening worldwide, under the auspices of neoliberalism and globalisation.

As part of an effort 'to unpick and demystify the fashion industry and its ideology' (p. 13), Hoskins describes the total system of fashion today, and again it is emblematic of capitalism as a whole: 'The fashion industry lays out in sharp relief all the ins and outs of capitalism' (p. 18), including the necessity to overthrow it. To demystify is to expose the 'social production' that underpins fashion and that obliges ideological distortions (p. 4). The book is a monument to a trail of destruction that manifests in beautiful forms. It memorializes moments that are lost in the torrent of media, such as the Rana Plaza sweatshops collapse in Bangladesh in 2013, which led to the deaths of more than 1000 garment workers and maimed 2500 more. Here, in appalling conditions with little recompense, the workers sweated over outfits for big firms such as Benetton, Bon Marché, Mango, Matalan, Primark, and Walmart. *Stitched Up* brings into view too the ongoing small miseries that do not dramatically make the front pages of the newspapers for a day: the draining of seas for cotton crops or the agonising death of crocodiles reared for handbags. Again and again big business is indicted and shown to be greedy, for fashion houses and stores refuse to raise the costs of clothes one cent, in order to pay workers a just slightly fairer wage (which amounts to only around 3 per cent of the cost of each item). Consumers are blind to the links in the chain that are far from them and driven by 'possessive compulsive disorder' (p. 7) and stoked-up feelings of inadequacy. They are greatly pressured to participate or risk ridicule.

Fashion is not, we are told, a peculiar Western obsession, but, in terms of production and consumption, a global phenomenon (and perhaps it always was – imperialism simply denied the possibility of being fashionable to those it deemed unworthy). It is therefore of universal significance. Universal it is, and apart from those who benefit financially, directly and substantially, from the conglomerated Haute Couture/High Street fashion industry, everyone and everything suffers in its ambit. Each chapter of *Stitched Up* explores a particular wounding that the fashion industry inflicts: on the almost slave-like labouring body in the sweatshops, exposed to competition on a global scale and pushed down and down and down; on the ever more precarious lives of zero-hours contracted shop workers in UK high street fashion stores; on the psyches of those intimidated by super-thin models or those compelled to actually be them; on the nerves of the indebted consumer who can't resist, but can't pay off; on the land commandeered for harvests and the animals reared in horrific conditions for their skin and fur; on the integrity of journalism, which becomes, through monopolised fashion reportage, a branch of advertising or vector of class-based and racist normativity and oppression. Nothing escapes the fashion system's clutches and even that which appears to be outside – like fashion bloggers or ethical wear – is really most firmly inside or on the point of being incorporated. Fashion under capitalism drags so much down. It even drags itself down, taking its own commitment to transience excessively seriously and turning throw-away with 'fast fashion', as in the 'Primark effect' of unrecyclable materials that make up large percentages of landfill waste, as if the world's resources were not precious. Even the 'season' that Marx wrote of so bitterly does not exist in the high street's constant turnover, but has proliferated in endless two-week mini-seasons, for which clothing must be supplied by subcontracted factories at the lowest possible cost, exerting immense pressure on workers' conditions, which are denigrated in favour of fulfilling production schedules.

Fashion tends to become rags in time and as such it came to play a role in the original Marxist presentation. Marx and Engels called the poorest class the *lumpenproletariat*; *lumpen* meaning cloth rags. The various tricks of the textile industry provided good ground for Marx and Engels to underscore the malevolent practices of capitalist industry. In *Capital*, volume three, Marx observes how the use of waste, for example, in the wool industry, makes substandard materials that generate more profits over time, because of their inferior quality. From this comes the word 'shoddy'.⁽⁵⁾ Hoskins' book is a primer on today's shoddy practices.

Fashion is a total system. What is stitched up here are the arguments, each one perhaps more or less known and already much debated in various forums: fashion oppresses larger women, the media are bullies, labouring conditions in the fashion industry are dismal, the planet is suffering under poorly regulated capitalism, new technologies, such as digital retouching tools, oppress us further, under capitalist ownership. But here in *Stitched Up*, the laments are collated into one screed, which incidentally comes from the Old

English screed, a 'strip of cloth'. The threads of capitalist exploitation and oppression are shown to be a whole tissue, though conversely, the fashion system also comes to represent just one thread of a greater fabric of capitalist production. If it is the case, as is argued, that one in six people working in the world toil in the fashion industry, then might it be that fashion is, as Marx asserted, at the core of capitalism and that it all the more legitimately provides a lens through which to explore it, rather than being aberrant?

The book does not content alone with outlining the horrors of the system. Various points of unravelling are proposed. The system will not unravel itself. It needs a dramatic act of unpicking or shredding. The final chapters propose ways to tear into this capitalist fabric, from subtle resistive ways in subcultural dress or other non-normative approaches to ethical consumerism, although the latter are shown to be inadequate, because they do not rip up the whole design. Fashion needs, as the final chapter puts it, to be revolutionised, which means that the whole mode of production needs to be overturned and remade. Reformism is too small a drop in an ocean of exploitation. Only the abolition of capitalism can provide conditions for fashion that is creative and cruelty-free.

Hoskins begins the book by arguing that 'A dress is not just a structure of meaning' (p. 5). In a literal move, her materialist analysis sticks with material, with its cutting, stitching, selling, advertising, wearing, disposing: '*Stitched Up* aims to keep the discussion of fashion firmly in the material world' (p. 15). Does this miss something of how fashion has been and might yet be used for political analysis or even augury? Marx was adept at reading it in this way. Discussing the first French republic, he notes how it 'was only a new evening dress for the old bourgeois society'. Elsewhere, Marx notes the reactionary nature of the French politicians establishing modern bourgeois society from 1789 until 1814. They adopt 'Roman costume' and 'Roman slogans.' These are 'self-deceptions' necessary to hide from themselves the limited bourgeois content of their struggles and to maintain their enthusiasm at the high level appropriate to great historical tragedy'.⁽⁶⁾ The next generation of power-mongers did likewise, copying the copiers, finding in 'the austere classical traditions of the Roman Republic' the 'ideals and the art forms, the self-deceptions' necessary, as Marx put it, 'to conceal from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the content of their struggles and to keep their enthusiasm on the high plane of great historical tragedy'.⁽⁷⁾ Here costume is suspect, donned to dissimulate. Fashion is material, but it is also powerfully metaphorical – it quotes, disguises, reveals and connects. Hoskins does not dwell on this aspect of fashion, though she mentions at points how 'clothes maketh the man' and that 'fashion is key to ideology' (p. 10). What do we do with that key though? What can it unlock? Walter Benjamin, for one, claimed that it was possible in Second Empire France to measure imperial ambition and scope by the circumference of the skirt or dress.⁽⁸⁾ Ambitiously, Benjamin's reading of fashion poses the question of whether the wind of history flutters through the leaves of the fashion journals of past centuries. Is the weightiness of human history to be reconstructed from, or even predicted from, the superficial plates of the fashion journals? A starker picture is that produced by *Stitched Up*, in which fashion's frivolous image is wholly undermined by the horror of the conditions of its making. But is the more shocking picture, and therefore the more long-lasting and deeper one, the one that seeks the hidden lining in fashion's frivolity? Can the details or even the outlines of explosions of class struggle – such as the bourgeois revolutions of 1848 or the libertarian social experiment of the Paris Commune of 1871 – be read in the details and the outlines of past fashion, as Walter Benjamin averred, or in the latest collection on the Paris catwalk or in H&M? Perhaps it is possible to discover a small feature that betrays, in the vocabulary of fashion, the ructions of history: 'Fashion à la victime', adopted during the bloodiest period of the French Revolution, comprised a red ribbon necklace to remember the slicing by the Guillotine. It was followed by loose gowns typical of those who were carted to their nasty end, and there was also a scarlet gown called 'à la Guillotine'. A century later, in the 1890s, Studio Jeanne Paquin cited this bloody start with a Robespierre dress, accentuating control with its belt and political rigour in its blackness. The next year Paquin's Thermidor dress imposed an appropriately Jacobin morally upright posture on its wearer. These few examples show that the fashion system is characterised by self-irony, and includes an awareness of its proximity to violence. History shudders through the creases in more or less visible ways, or at least summons it to sashay a while. Violence now costumes and now displays itself and the cut is the deepest of things and the hang is to die for. Hoskins arrives more pragmatically, more literally at the conclusion that

fashion, or more specifically, the fashion industry is deadly, and that its seductions are lethal.

Notes

1. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, (New York, NY, 2012), p. 525.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 523.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Marx, *ibid.*[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 325.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, (New York, NY, 2012), p. 122.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Marx, *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Rockville, MD, 2008), p. 16.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Marx, *ibid.*[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 76.[Back to \(8\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/06/stitched-up-anti-capitalist-book-fashion-tansy-hoskins-review> [2]

LSE Review of Books

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/04/10/book-review-stitched-up-the-anti-capitalist-book-of-fashion-by-tansy-e-hoskins/> [3]

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