

Clothes & Modernity

Derek Simon

The main question that comes to mind when we observe the links between clothing and modernity could be this: at what point in their history and after what process did clothes become modern? And a second: to what extent is our so called “modern” era also modern in terms of clothes, and in what way?

Before starting, we must specify what we mean by modern. Here, we will be referring to two definitions: on the one hand modernity as a historical period, that began at the start of the 19th century and reached its peak in the first half of the 20th century; and the other modernity meaning the combination of an ethic (the search for the relationship shape/function) and an aesthetics (the abandonment of the ornamental in favour of the visibility of the structure), an approach that can be found in the furniture and the utility object of the Early American Period (the 18th century popular American), and among certain French architects of the same period (Ledoux, Boullée, Lequeu) or in the Anglo-Saxon decorative art of the beginning of the 19th century (Biedermeier or Arts & Crafts). But we could also see it in the first gothic architecture (that was but the architectural expression of a technical wish, that of the reduction of weight carrying structures in favour of glass, just like the metallic architecture of the 19th century) or in traditional Japanese houses. While this approach was totally absent during the Renaissance and the baroque era (both over-use ornaments) –as can be seen also in clothing from the 1400’s to about 1750– it is also important to mention the fact that what we refer to as modernity today is but a historical “periodisation” of an approach that did not always exist, but is far from limiting itself to the

20th century. So, the history of clothes can be linked in many ways to this dual notion of modernity: either the garment was “modern” in ancient times, as we will see or that it hasn’t always been in the modern era.

Around 1350, a major event occurred that historians refer to as “The cut of clothes”: men’s clothes became short and fitted while women’s clothing remained long and full, retaining the essential characteristics of the robe from late Antiquity that lasted, in different variations, throughout the Middle Ages. But what might appear as a mere aesthetic variation revealed a need, if not ethical then practical, that led to the massive adoption by men of short fitted clothing, and the doublet, that already existed as a functional garment as it was a padded item worn under armour to protect the body. Accompanying the cut of the garment, the doublet highlights a major evolutionary clothing event: the move from a technical garment to an everyday and/or appearance-based garment resulting in importance being given to function and structure. It was not by chance that another example of this slide occurred in the middle of the 18th century when the riding coat slowly replaced French men’s clothing that had existed since the 17th century: a technical garment to begin with (reserved, obviously enough, for riding), the riding coat (or in French the “redingote”) obeyed the same principles: widespread shifting adoption through use of a garment that was both simple and functional, with obvious structure and, to begin with at least, not very ornamental. The British historian James Laver identified the phenomenon that changed a technical garment (and, as such, one reserved for a specific “social period”) to an everyday use, obeying an ethic –that we could refer to as “modernist”– in its search for simplicity, functionality and comfort, and the best example of which is probably jeans.

However, it was not until the beginning of the 20th century that historical modernity gave these shifts a historical framework, which was often merely a *trompe-l’œil*. In effect, we often want to believe that modernity in clothing came from fashion and its official “authorities”,

designers. So we cite Poiret or Vionnet for freeing women from the corset when, in fact, it was often usage rather than design that led to the change. Proof of this is the attempts to impose a simplified and modern garment –from the bloomers created by Libby Miller in 1851 in the United States to the Rational Dress Movement that was founded in England in 1881, from the theorisation of the garment led by the constructivists (Popova or Rodtchenko) to the futuristic fashion of Cardin, Courrèges and Rabanne–, very few of which actually ended up in the wardrobes of their times. However, the major innovations – the real modernity of the garment– continued to occur through usage, the technical garment gradually passing into everyday use: jeans, again but also most of the major items in the contemporary wardrobe: trousers (sailor’s long trousers), jackets (from military clothing), the t-shirt (underwear becoming outerwear), the sweat suit, baseball cap and trainers (from sports), etc. Modernity in clothing, if we can refer to this notion, comes not so much from thought-out innovation but arises from one of the four main technical garment fields: work wear, military clothing, sportswear and underwear. This means that clothes only really evolve through their utilitarian edges, in places where they manage a conjunction between a search for effectiveness, whatever it may be, and technical progress –from the evolution of materials to tricks and cutting details. After all, the specific cross-over closing of the Perfecto biker’s jacket comes from the need to protect the upper half of the body on the motorbike. The rest, the way it is taken up by everyone, is a question of sociology –as all the innovations of the technical garment do not pass through to everyday clothes. A number of designers claim they would have liked to have invented jeans. The problem is, jeans weren’t invented, they were adopted by people for reasons that were more economic and cultural (that of the America of the thirties and forties when jeans went from being work wear to everyday wear) than for their pure “physical” qualities –as nearly all of the work wear in the West of the time, from the English docker’s trousers to that of French carpenter’s gear, could have ful-

filled the same functions and undergo the same evolution– only their evocative potential (the nuance is not to be underestimated) was different from that of jeans.

So, there is less modernity in garments themselves than in their use and, while on the subject, it is important to mention the other big component of modernity in 20th century clothing, one also linked to its use: the notion of a wardrobe. Here again, the official history and its own glorification by brands lead us to think that the notion of a wardrobe comes from the official “authorities of fashion: we take for granted that the notion of combining pieces in the contemporary wardrobe (in other words, a relative versatility in items that enables varied combinations, when until the twenties, clothes were designed according to the principle of a total outfit) was invented by Chanel and her famous suit. While Gabrielle Chanel did indeed do much for the promotion of this vision of the wardrobe, the (relative) versatility that she developed quite successfully from the fifties goes back, in fact, to the American wardrobe of the thirties and forties when, a more relaxed, mix and match silhouette began to appear on university campuses and in urban areas, again inspired by clothes from sport, that gave rise to the notion of separates and, more generally that of American Sportswear, made widely popular by the ready-to-wear of the forties and fifties led by designers from industry such as Claire McCardell.

So, to answer the two questions asked at the start of this article, it seems we can affirm that clothing, throughout history, has been less modernised due to theoretical concepts (as was the case in architecture and furniture) than as a follow on from a sociological movement that saw the adoption by the masses of a garment that was previously used for technical reasons only. This makes the modernisation of clothes quite specific: it operates on the edges and has never happened *ex nibilo* as it always relies on the re-use of a pre-existing but specific garment. As for architecture, the object or most equipment, modernisation is the fruit of *invention*; in fashion it is more the fruit of

adoption – that is often slower than one might think (the invention of mechanically knitted fabric dates back to the end of the 18th century, it was employed in making underwear at the end of the 19th century and was adopted for outer garments in the middle of the 20th century). The modernisation of clothing, if not its modernity, is the result of unpredictable acts of adoption that have more to do with sociology (and economics) than with technological thought or aesthetic projection. It also, without a doubt, has something to do with social upheaval (be it demographic, political or economic) and the acts of individuation it leads to under the influence of new entrants and new social situations. The cutting of clothing in the 1350's corresponds exactly to the epidemic of the black plague of 1348 that upset the demography and sociology of the entire continent of Europe. On the other hand, the principles that still rule “modern” menswear were built at the same time as the social and economic mutations of the end of the 18th century and the de-structuring of the contemporary suit was accelerated by the shock of the Second World War.

Thus, and to finish, clothing has been modern for longer than we tend to think and at the same time remarkably archaic in some ways: do we realise that the blind button on the inside of a suit is a throwback to the turn-down collar of the riding coat? Or that the ring on the belt of a raincoat was originally for hanging hand grenades during the First World War? Or that what is seen on the runway each season is not as new as it seems and that fashion, a recycling organism, progresses thanks to the people that wear it (and more democratically also) rather than the people that make it?

Derek Simon
University of Santa Barbara