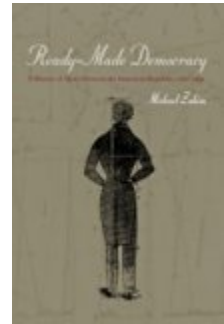


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Zakim. *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men's Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. x + 296 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-97793-5.

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What Will You Wear to the Revolution?

A university press recently asked me to review a manuscript; when told the book's title, I immediately deduced the author's identity because I had read everything this scholar has written. Rather than considering this an obstacle to a fair review, the press welcomed my comments. I mention my reading of this unpublished manuscript primarily to introduce a lingering prejudice that places the field of clothing history outside of "academic respectability." The author, a prominent scholar in dress history, included a defense of clothing history as "real" history in her preface. In *Ready-Made Democracy*, Michael Zakim apparently also felt the need to reinforce the legitimacy of his topic, for his opening paragraph seems to say: "See, clothing is important. Look, Gandhi used clothing for political means. And look at all these other examples of political dress. If clothing can be tied to politics, than it must be worthy of attention." Zakim is much more subtle in promoting the intellectual merit of *Ready-Made Democracy* than I am suggesting. Nevertheless, the marshalling of political leaders such as Gandhi and Mao, and the listing of apparel such as liberty caps and sans-culottes immediately signals to the reader that this history of men's dress is no frivolous description of rising and falling collars; this is *serious* history, this is political history.

Since most clothing scholars, at least those housed in history, sociology, and anthropology departments, do it, I can hardly find fault with Michael Zakim for emphasizing the relevance of clothing as a historical source. However, it is more difficult to accept his failure to ac-

knowledge earlier works of clothing history in his introduction, which is largely historiographical. The introduction is grounded in a discussion of the intellectual roots of the American Revolution, worker activism, gendered democracy, and consumerism, as well as those historians (most familiar to subscribers of H-SHEAR) who study these issues. Studies like *Ready-Made Democracy* emerge not only from the methodologies of political, social, and economic history but also from the new critical examinations of menswear that began in the 1990s: Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life 1860-1914* (1999); David Kuchta, *The Three Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity: England 1550-1850* (2002); Shaun Cole, *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel: Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* (2000). Until the end of the twentieth century, scholars tended to ignore men's fashions due to the prevalent cultural attitude that regards men as uninterested in the frivolities of fashion and clothes beyond absolute necessity. Breward, Kutchka, and Cole reassert the place of men in the history of fashion as they simultaneously focus on class, consumption, and manufacturing; Zakim affirms male fashion's place in the history of politics.

Democratization is a theme emphasized by a number of historians who have studied the history of clothing manufacture in the nineteenth century. Usually historians use the term to mean the spread of fashion from upper-class women to other classes through inexpensive mass-produced clothing and patterns. This spread of fashion then becomes the means whereby the great ma-

majority of American women can dress in fashions that no longer distinguish them by class. They share a “democracy” of fashion, almost all having equal access to whatever status dressing fashionably may bring. Claudia Kidwell and Margaret C. Christman are usually credited with introducing this idea in their *Suiting Everyone: The Democratization of Clothing in America* (1974). In addition, clothing historians recognize the role of dress in visually defining nationalism and patriotism and political ideology across space and time.[1] In other words, what people see is as important as what they read and hear when it comes to deconstructing nationalism, and clothing historians do not lose sight of this sensory aspect of the past. Curiously, Zakim’s study is less about what people saw, and more about how the clothing and cloth were manufactured as though he followed British writer Thomas Carlyle’s analysis: “Man’s [sic] earthly interests are all hooked and buttoned together and held up by clothes—society is founded upon cloth.” Many of the dress historians mentioned above can be found in the notes that accompany the text of *Ready-Made Democracy*, but the introduction is reserved for the political, economic, and labor historians who provide the intellectual underpinnings for the study.

Given the amount of space I have devoted to taking Michael Zakim to task for relegating clothing scholars to the “dustbin of political history,” you might suppose that the remainder of this review will be an exercise in finding fault. This is not the case, *Ready-Made Democracy* delves deeply into the cultural significance of the consumption and manufacture of dress in the American Republic. Fashion is often thought of as a matter of personal taste. This book supports the argument of many clothing historians that the seemingly simple issue of the choice of clothing has played a significant role in political participation and protest.

Zakim’s book traces the rise of the United States’s ready-made fashion industry and the transformation of the United States into a democratic capitalist society. The story of this transformation begins with “homespun ideology.” The strong economic sanctions England imposed against the colonists demanded an equally strong political response. The colonists chose to produce and wear their own homespun clothing instead of imported fabrics; homespun’s plainness came to symbolize American frugality, independence, and industry. Political leaders of the revolutionary cause wore homespun for many public appearances: George Washington wore the domestically produced textile at his 1789 inauguration. Dress that reflected “the American qualities of republicanism

and simplicity,” argues Zakim, gave way to business dress codes that served capitalist growth and sober citizenship by the end of the antebellum period (pp. 123, 125). In tracing this transition, Zakim concludes that the history of the suit is the history of U.S. society: “A great transformation had indeed taken place in the transition from homespun to ready-made, both in the nature of politics and in the relationship of persons to ‘goods’” (p. 218). It is worth noting that Zakim’s interpretations support Diana Crane’s theory that “tracing changes in the nature of fashion and in the criteria for clothing choices is one way of understanding the differences between the type of society that has been gradually disappearing and the one that is slowly emerging.”[2]

Having made his point about the “mutual embrace of capitalism and democracy,” Zakim ends his study in 1860 just before the Civil War, which led to important breakthroughs in men’s ready-made clothing production (p. 219). Standardized sizing and the large-scale use of the sewing machine enabled manufacturers to create masses of clothing and allowed them to further exploit women desperate to earn a few dollars. At the conclusion of the war, demand for uniforms ceased, and companies diverted their production to civilian garments and made a wider choice of ready-made clothing available to men. This post-war history is outside the scope of *Ready-Made Democracy*.

Those familiar with the history of clothing will not find much that is new in Zakim’s book. Those unfamiliar with the history of male dress and textiles in the United States will no doubt be intrigued by Zakim’s analysis (in the dissertation stage, *Ready-Made Democracy* won Columbia University’s Bancroft dissertation prize). Those looking for a history of male clothing in the United States 1760-1860 will be frustrated by the book’s stress on industry and workers. Regardless, richly detailed, engaging, and provocative, *Ready-Made Democracy* shows how clothing can not only reflect but also inculcate standards, values, and transformation.

Notes

[1]. A recent example is Wendy Parkins, ed., *Fashioning the Body Politic: Dress, Gender, Citizenship* (Oxford: Berg, 2002). The articles in this book argue that, from the French Revolution to Imperial Russia to Post-Revolutionary China, “what people wear to conceal and expose their persons can take the historian to the core of complex social and political processes of stability and change, conformism and challenge to the status quo” (p. 225).

[2]. Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 236.

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