



## ***Dressed for Freedom: The Fashionable Politics of American Feminism***

**Einav Rabinovitch-Fox**

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### **Review by Shelby Shapiro, first published online 14 November 2024.**

Einav Rabinovitch-Fox's *Dressed for Freedom: The Fashionable Politics of American Feminism* deserves a place on your bookshelves next to the works of scholars such as Kathy Peis<sup>1</sup> and Valerie Steele.<sup>2</sup> In addition to their skills as historians and interesting and accessible writers, they both see women as agents rather than (to use ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel's phrase) "cultural dopes."<sup>3</sup> All three go to great lengths to demonstrate that, whether in cosmetics or clothing, women are making conscious choices. They are not being manipulated by either designers or the denizens of Madison Avenue.

In the mid-to-late 1950s, social critic Vance Packard (1914-1996) had a series of best-sellers, all based on the concept that Madison Avenue was duping the public through the evils of consumerism. *The Hidden*

*Persuaders* (1957) "exposed" the advertising industry; *The Status Seekers* (1959) spoke to the evils of conspicuous consumption, while *The Waste Makers* (1960) dealt with "planned obsolescence" as a method of capitalist profit-making. These books were the grandchildren of Thorstein Veblen's conception of "conspicuous consumption" from his *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). This view of consumption and consumerism uses sociological language to mask a moralistic message, namely that "production is good" and "consumption is evil." (Consider for a moment that "consumption" was the former name for tuberculosis).<sup>4</sup>

What Rabinovitch-Fox does particularly well in this book is to display the diversity of American womanhood and feminisms. In discussing how various issues played out among different groups, she

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<sup>1</sup> *Hope in a Jar: The Making of American Beauty Culture*, 1998; *Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career of an Extreme Style*, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age*, 1985; *The Corset: A Cultural History*, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Prentice-Hall, 1967); see also Anthony Giddens, "Garfinkel,

Ethnomethodology and Hermeneutics," in *Politics, Sociology and Social Theory: Encounters with Classical and Contemporary Thought* (1995), 235.

<sup>4</sup> For a history and critique of this orientation, see Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 1992).



integrates these varieties, noting the similarities as well as the differences. For example, two events occurred in 1968: the No More Miss America protest (pp. 153-156) and the first Miss Black America contest (p. 162), which also challenged the Miss America contest, but in another way. Working-class women and immigrants had interests different from those of the mainstream feminist movements. When Clara Lemlich, leader of the Uprising of the 20,000 garment workers' strike, wore a fashionable shirtwaist, she was not imitating middle-class college students or pretending that she was anyone else but herself: she was asserting her right to wear beautiful clothes (pp. 32-34).

Rabinovitch-Fox is careful to note the differences among those calling for equal rights for women, women's suffrage and feminism. Despite similarities in clothing style, the African-American civil rights leader and activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett was barred by White suffragists from marching with the Illinois delegation in the 1913 suffrage parade in Washington, D.C., Wells

" . . . famously integrated the 1913 parade, when--despite resistance from the organizers to march with her fellow state suffragists--she joined the Illinois delegation from the crowd, wearing their matching hats and banners. By dressing like her White counterparts, Wells not only asserted her right to equal citizenship as a woman, but she also promoted racial equality as a African American, laying claims to middle-class respectability." (p. 66-67).

Rabinovitch-Fox recognizes that particular fashions do not carry inherent messages, but rather the messages its users wish to convey, if any. Rabinovitch-Fox is careful to note the variety of messages those wearing particular clothes seek to convey, and how these change over time. Angela Y. Davis, the African-American radical who ran for office under the Communist Party USA banner, championed the natural, or Afro hairstyle. While for Davis it was a political statement, ultimately it became one of the possibilities available to women as a hairstyle, regardless of political persuasion. Rabinovitch-Fox notes that the same kinds of clothes were worn by feminists such as Betty Friedan, Shirley Chisolm and Bella Abzug—and conservative anti-feminists such as Phyllis Schlafly (p. 159).

One of the few criticisms this reviewer has with *Dressed for Freedom*—and admittedly it is not huge—is that at least four times she refers to “self-proclaimed” or “self-identified feminists” (pp. 49, 71, 106, 186). Does this mean that they were not “real” feminists? Or simply that they announced their allegiance, instead of having outside others foist it upon them?

Fashion historian Valerie Steele noted how fashion cycles occur: a particular innovation becomes increasingly exaggerated until finally a new innovation comes along. The insight might have been mentioned, and would have helped in following the life-cycle of the mini-skirt; the same could be said of the width of men's jacket lapels, which reached its zenith with Zoot suits.<sup>5</sup>

This is an extremely rich book, and this reviewer has only touched upon a few of its treasures. The author talks about early attempts at clothing reform, such as the Rainy Day Club, attempts to develop uniforms for feminists—as well as attempts to influence fashion by the clothing industry, the change from the pre-World War Two center of fashion (Paris) to New York, initially in reaction to wartime exigencies, and then, to developments within the industry. She amply demonstrates how women customers adopted some changes and rejected others. Not willing to play the role of “cultural dopes,” customers had the final say. This book deserves wide recognition, readership, and attention.

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<sup>5</sup> Peiss, Kathy, *Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career of an Extreme Style* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).