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Richard Wrigley, *The Politics of Appearances: Representations of Dress in Revolutionary France*. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2002 . 310 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl); ISBN 1-85973-504-5. \$25.00 U.S. (pb); ISBN 1-85973-509-6.

Review by Dorinda Outram, University of Rochester.

Revolutionary France devoted extraordinary energy to the making and unmaking of distinctions between one person and another. This book deals with the way in which costume and individual items of clothing, such as feathers, shoe buckles, shoes, round hats, badges, cockades, and culottes (or the lack of them) were made part of the machinery of difference. There is also a second, interlocking story at work here. Such costumes and smaller objects of dress are signs of conformity to the revolutionary orthodoxy of the moment. It is true that costumes, badges, cockades, and liberty caps were created and then hidden and destroyed as a result of the oscillations of revolutionary struggles. This is a story that has often been told before. More interestingly, in this account, clothes are used not only as signs of events, but are also shown as playing into revolutionary ideological battles at a far deeper level. The author makes no claim that these “appearances” caused the notoriously rapid movements of revolutionary politics, but he has constructed a very detailed account of battles over symbols and appearances that illuminates from a fresh viewpoint the politics of 1789 to 1799.

This mapping of dress onto revolutionary politics is a delicate business, and perhaps more consideration could have been given to it in this already thoughtful book. What are the criteria at work here to tell us what is a valid interpretation and what is not? There are maybe two choices here: one is the analysis of speech and documentary evidence of various kinds interpreting dress. The other is the choice of interpreting the articles of dress as part of material culture. This book struggles with a paradox. Its mission is the interpretation of a particular class of physical objects. Yet those objects have now largely disappeared. As the author carefully describes, surviving articles of dress are rare. Their often highly symbolic nature meant that many were hidden or destroyed for what was embroidered on them (like liberty caps). They exist now for the main part only in written allusions. We have almost certainly lost any possibility of writing a history of what it felt like to wear such costumes. So that while we have recent histories of smell and of sight, a history of what it felt like to wear clothes will not appear from this evidence.

It is thus very difficult to establish any sense of that typicality so important for historical analysis. A typical treaty, a typical family, a typical last will and testament, are familiar ideal types through which historians establish their arguments about novelty and development. As Wrigley himself remarks, it is difficult indeed, in this paucity of the very physical evidence for the historian's subject, to resist the assumption that paintings, drawings, and prints provide us with a convenient or necessarily reliable documentary record of changing forms of dress (p. 6). This is where the lack of large numbers of clothes—that is, the impossibility of establishing typicality—really becomes important. Where historians have to take what evidence they can get, then it becomes very important to remain aware of the limitations, particularly of verbal data, in the face of a textile, a badge, or a shoe, or a buckle.

Garments are also parts of other histories: for example, the history of material culture. It had taken the rising prosperity of the eighteenth century, global trade, and the industrial revolution to not only cause a proliferation of objects in general, but also to affect the textile trades in particular. Cheap cotton replaced dear silk brocade. Far more people could dress cheaply, freshly, cleanly. All this made it much easier to use garments as homes for significance. The difference between pinning a cockade against a

clean intact cotton shirt, as against torn, worn, grimy, often odorous second-hand linen may be imagined. Against the latter, the revolutionary insignia would be dishonored, dragged into association with the garment onto which it was pinned. The history of revolutionary clothes is not only part of the history of material culture, but also of the history of the perceptions of cleanliness, of the sense of smell, of comfort, and of respectability. Such perceptions help us to understand the history of difference and dress by broadening our sense of typicality, so necessary in this history, and by enabling us to see how many of the political gestures of the Revolution were helped just as much by material culture as by ideology.

The garments and badges are also problematic as evidence because of the difficult logical problems that affect the history of any kind of object. Strictly speaking, an object is proof of nothing but its own existence. This means the historical interpretation of objects must proceed with unusual caution. As the archaeological maxim has it: that what can be done with an object may not be the same as the purpose for which it was originally designed. There is a second serious logical problem in Wrigley's account, which is so focused on the concept of difference. Does "difference" mean "incommensurability" or does it mean that things are differentiated (in relation to whatever criteria) along a spectrum? To ask this question would be to ask how we as historians classify difference. It would also be to ask how deep were the differences between present and past.

The period of the French Revolution is notorious for the mountain of documentary material it generated. The interaction between the history of dress and politics is thus unique in revolutionary history for the imbalance between the voluminous written documents relating to the subject of dress and the limited number of the material objects themselves. This book is largely, apart from a few autobiographies, based therefore on formal documents such as the *Actes du comité du salut public*, or reports by agents of the secret police or of the spies of the Ministry of the Interior. They relate to events that add up to the picture of the French Revolution with which we are familiar: as beset with (among many other problems) the problem of difference and similarity. The Revolution was the successor of a royal and aristocratic order. This was not an order which was static; far from it. Nonetheless, it was an order which relied on the continual proclamation of difference. In this order, the king—its political and ritual center—was as close to God as other men were far from the King. He was of a nature incommensurate with theirs. That incommensurability was not the same as difference. The king's relationship with God was incommensurable with the sorts of difference that existed between men. The king was the fount of honor and therefore the fount of difference. The whole social order was thus centered on the idea of difference.

The Revolution at first acted predictably in its attempts to erase difference. Priests, monks, and nuns were forbidden to wear ecclesiastical dress. Aristocracy was abolished, and successive regimes struggled to turn Louis XVI into a constitutional monarch. They struggled to make a nation one and indivisible, only to find that they too needed difference. The heroes of the Revolution and its lawgivers needed to be singled out, exactly to show their patriotic virtue and to enter the mythology that legitimated the Revolution. Versions of this struggle went into the revolutionary representative institutions: elected lawgivers were held not only to represent their electoral districts, but also to represent France as a whole. Difference and unity pulled against each other. Only the coming of Napoleon was to resolve the irresolvable tensions that were not just evidenced by dress, but in actuality lay deep in the political and constitutional problems of the Revolution. But these did not just emerge in 1789. Problems over transparency and deception were widely discussed under the *ancien régime*, and this gave a continuity that counterbalances the picture of the Revolution as a complete break with the past.

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