

Dressing the Sovereign: Fashion as a Symbolic Form of Sovereignty

Written by Andreas Behnke

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One of the most popular sections of the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC is the 'First Ladies at the Smithsonian' exhibit where daily, many hundreds and sometimes thousands of visitors gaze at historical and contemporary gowns worn by First Ladies of the USA.

What accounts for this interest in, and indeed fascination with, what First Ladies wore day-to-day in the White House, at official events, banquets and receptions, or on Inauguration Day? Traditionally, Political Science with its ontological commitment to a disembodied subject has little to offer in the way of explaining this. The relationship between fashion, femininity and political power has often been commented upon, yet hardly ever systematically investigated. Usually consigned to the Style section of newspapers and magazines, it is relegated to the accidental, frivolous, and at best entertaining, realm of political paraphernalia. What to wear and what not to wear as a First Lady is more often than not considered a light-hearted social commentary by 'fashionistas' obsessing over a topic that bears little relevance to the proper issues of high politics.

But appearances clearly matter, and one should note the effort, purpose, and creativity put into fashionable appearances by First Ladies and women with political power across the world (Young 2011). Secondly, sociological (and even philosophical) studies have long since established the role of fashion and dress in the symbolic construction of diverse social identities.[1] There is therefore no reason to assume that the constitution of political identities does not involve the purposeful use of sartorial symbolism. The notion that fashion and politics are unrelated is a deeply ahistorical and misleading one; for centuries political power and sartorial code have been in a close relationship in which the former was not only expressed through fashion, but in which the latter also co-constituted political authority. The argument of this article is that even in the age of disembodied authority and sovereignty, the visualization of the body politic and the sovereign power underlying it remains a relevant, if problematic issue of statecraft (Parkins 2002: 3). Sovereignty is in constant need to be represented and visualized, and in the process aestheticized. To put matters simply, as a metaphysical concept, it requires the visualization of its 'glory' to sustain its 'power'. This article therefore focuses on the gendered symbolic practices through which sovereignty is made visible and recognizable. 'Recognition', writes Andrea Brighenti (2007: 329), 'is a form of social visibility'. And '[o]nce we see social recognition as embedded in a visibility field' new questions about the visibility of political concepts become possible (2007: 331).

Sovereignty as Symbolic Form

In order to fully appreciate the visibility of sovereignty, the latter notion should be conceptualized as a 'symbolic form'. Following Jens Bartelson, as symbolic form, 'sovereignty is a mode of objectivation that has been allowed to structure the production of both meaning and experience' (2014: 15). By providing a 'template', a symbolic form structures and organizes otherwise disorderly and historically changing experiences into intelligible wholes. Writes Cassirer, 'symbolic forms are not imitations, but organs of reality; since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension, and as such is made visible to us. ... For the mind only that can be visible which has some definite form' (Cassirer 1946: 8). As symbolic form, sovereignty then becomes a reality out of historically and culturally varying forms of symbolic 'embodiments'. 'Claims to supreme authority have long been

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encoded in weaponry and coinage, and symbols of sovereign authority have been embodied in sceptres and crowns, until the erection and restoration of historical monuments became an important way of evoking imaginaries of national identity and belonging during the nineteenth century' (Bartelson 2014: 17). We should forgive the author for overlooking fashion and sartorial code in this enumeration, as its inclusion in the list of relevant symbolic embodiments of sovereignty suggests itself.

Sovereignty has historically been heavily imbued with symbolic practices that establish the position as ordained by divine will, historical fate, revolutionary spirit, or democratic elections. Sovereignty always deploys a regime of visibility. We are used to seeing symbols of sovereign power such as flags displayed when the sovereign appears on the political stage, the playing of anthems, and the presence of uniformed military guards on the occasion of state visits. Yet in modern (Western) societies that pride themselves on having 'democratized' political power and subjected the sovereign exercise of power to constitutional constraints the ostentatious display of power and glory that characterized pre-democratic monarchical regimes seems to have been relegated to museums, galleries and archives. While constitutional monarchs from time to time still dress in traditional royal garb on those occasions when the sovereignty that they symbolize but no longer embody is to be displayed, in most contemporary Western societies such as the USA, the UK, Germany, or France there is apparently nothing remarkable, spectacular, or even symbolic about the way sovereign power is fashioned.

Against this common (mis-)understanding, this chapter asserts that sovereignty always combines 'power and glory', that even today the constitutive authority of the state is dressed up and made visible in the grandeur of sartorial appearances. To make this visual regime of sovereignty visible to researchers, its gendered nature needs to be emphasized. More specifically, it is the political role of First Ladies to provide the sartorial glory to the masculinized power of the modern sovereign.

In present-day politics, no other First Lady has received as much attention regarding her sartorial competence and practices as Michelle Obama, the wife of U.S. President Barack Obama. Mrs Obama's exceptional fashion sense (for a First Lady) defines her as the epitome and apex of the general structure of contemporary symbolic forms of sovereignty where femininity and fashion serve as the necessary, rather than superfluous or frivolous, sublime supplement to masculinized power. In other words, bloggers', journalists', and the public's fascination and preoccupation with her style cast into sharper relief a more general phenomenon that in one way or another applies universality to 'women in power' (Young 2011).

Sartorial Code and Sartorial Opprobrium

While today sovereignty can be represented symbolically through shirtless presidents on horseback or in swimming trunks, for the First Lady herself any demonstration of casualness and renunciation of sartorial standards is interpreted as a deprecation of that sovereignty. When images of Mrs Obama emerged in August 2009 during a vacation that showed her descend from Air Force One wearing shorts, T-shirt and sneakers, media and public opinion went into high gear. As Robin Givhan pointed out, there was as such nothing wrong with the outfit, as it did not include any tasteless t-shirt, fanny pack or flip-flops – the accessories of all too many American tourists home and abroad. For a private vacation outing to the Grand Canyon, Givhan maintained, Mrs Obama's choices were impeccable, only to add, 'But this does not make the ensemble ok' (Givhan 2009). The reason she gives to support this sartorial verdict point precisely to the gendered division of labour in the symbolic representation of sovereignty that is the central argument of this article. In Givhan's words,

until the West Wing — and not the East — starts regularly fielding inquiries regarding china patterns, decorators and the menu for upcoming White House dinners and luncheons, the first lady will be burdened with matters of aesthetics. And her person remains the primary device in communicating her philosophy. (Givhan 2009)

In other words, it is (the office of) the First Lady in the East Wing of the White House that has primary responsibility for the sublime symbolic forms of sovereignty, while the West Wing – the President's office – is the site of unadorned power. This function cannot be suspended for a 'vacation' or any other 'private moment'. As the integral, sublime symbolic form of US sovereignty, the figure of the First Lady can never escape the public gaze. In Givhan's critical

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words:

Ultimately, the first lady can't be — nor should she be — just like everyone else. Hers is a life of responsibilities and privileges. She gets the fancy jet. She has to dress for the ride. (Givhan 2009)[2]

To dress down, to dress casually and in a 'private' manner thus runs the risk of symbolically disrespecting and diminishing the power of the sovereign, to deny its sublime nature and to make it 'common' (Givhan 2009).

Fashion Diplomacy and Imperial Sovereignty

While Michelle Obama is certainly not the only historical or contemporary First Lady involved in fashion diplomacy, she nonetheless deserves special attention because of the particular narrative about American sovereignty she articulates and expresses in this way. The following analysis will focus on the sartorial narratives Mrs Obama produced on the occasion of the eight state dinners the White House conducted between 2009 and 2014. What stands out is that on four of these occasions Mrs Obama wore a dress by a designer with a direct connection to the guest nation. At the state dinner for British Prime Minister David Cameron in March 2012, she wore a gown by the English designer Georgina Chapman and her New York-based label *Marchesa*. On three further occasions she wore dresses by 'hyphenated Americans' designers. On the very first state dinner of the new administration in November 2009 in honour of the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Mrs. Obama wore a strapless silver-sequined evening gown by the Indian-American designer Naeem Khan.

In October 2011 the guests of a state dinner for the South Korean President Lee Myung-bak saw Mrs Obama in a one-shoulder purple gown created by the Korean-American designer Doo-ri Chung. And for a state dinner with the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in April 2015 she wore a purple sleeveless and floor-length gown by the Japanese-born American designer Tadashi Shoji (Bennett 2015).

What message do these sartorial choices convey as symbolic forms of sovereignty? Implied in this fashion diplomacy is the statement that the aesthetic talent of the designer has only been realized, indeed can only be realized, in the USA when it becomes part of 'American creativity and craftsmanship'. The creativity and talent of 'foreign' nationals is therefore rightfully appropriated by the USA, as this move is the condition under which this potential can be realized in a globalized (fashion) world. Foreign cultures, aesthetics, and fashion traditions are mere raw material to be appropriated by a New York-based fashion industry that transforms them into globally recognizable, rather than nationally limited, products. Mrs Obama's sophisticated fashion diplomacy therefore gives symbolic form to what scholars have characterized as the U.S.'s 'imperial sovereignty' that underpins the American role in the globalization of political, economic, and cultural spaces. In the words of Hardt and Negri,

Perhaps the fundamental characteristic of imperial sovereignty is that its space is always open. [The] modern sovereignty that developed in Europe from the sixteenth century onward conceived space as bounded, and its boundaries were always policed by the sovereign administration. Modern sovereignty resides precisely on the limit. In the imperial conception, by contrast, power finds the logic of its order always renewed and always re-created in expansion. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 167)

The expansive logic of this sovereignty is reflected and given symbolic form in the appropriation of the productivity and creativity of 'hyphenated American' designers. The hyphenation of their identity, combining their national heritage and tradition with the globalising U.S. identity, reflects the subjectivity that this form of sovereignty fashions: any successful designer is an American in the making. The designer's subjectivity and creativity can no longer refer to stable (national) spaces; in the age of imperial sovereignty it becomes a product of trans-national dynamics. The hyphenation therefore encompasses the liberation of both subjectivity and creativity from traditional limits. Rather than facing fixed boundaries, imperial sovereignty encounters a moving frontier to be conquered, included, and absorbed. Wearing gowns by hyphenated American designers symbolizes and authenticates the inclusion and absorption of their spaces of origin into the globalising American space. There is in this conception no more constitutive outside as produced by the classical European model of sovereignty. There are only obstacles, challenges, and resistances to overcome for the globalising momentum of U.S. imperial sovereignty. To hyphenate

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identity and creativity is not simply a merging or 'hybridization' of identity. Rather, it gives that identity a whole new, globalized, identity.

The final dress to be discussed deserves particular attention. In January 2011, on the occasion of a state dinner for Chinese President Hu Jintao, the First Lady wore a bright red evening gown, designed by Sarah Burton, the brand's new creative director and successor to Alexander McQueen.

While the red colour of the dress clearly paid homage to Chinese culture, the choice of a European designer does not fit Mrs Obama's preference for hyphenated American designers. The symbolic form this gown gives to American sovereignty therefore does not repeat the imperial gesture of the sartorial choices discussed above. China, it is thereby acknowledged, is not part of the American frontier; it is not considered a site of creativity and productivity to be realized by 'becoming American'. While it recognizes Chinese culture through the choice of its colour, the gown does not render it as mere creative reservoir for American-fashioned globalization. In Givhan's (2011) words, the 'red petal print, silk organza gown wasn't so much an act of diplomacy as a broad statement about the new realities of the fashion industry'. It thus also fashions a very different symbolic narrative about globalization in which this process takes precedent over any lingering nationalism and boundaries:

Mrs. Obama's considered fashion message, her full-skirted dress, from a British fashion house worn in celebration of a Chinese president, struck a blow for creativity. In grand and sweeping terms, one could argue that it symbolized the ability of a designer's imagination to cross borders, connect different cultures, and ultimately express itself in a singular moment of beauty. (Givhan 2011)

The gown, in other words, gives sublime symbolic form to a process that itself is significantly driven as much by economic and financial interests as it is by designer's imaginations. The border-transcending dynamics that make it possible to put together the sartorial assemblage Givhan describes here are not least an expression of late capitalism's economic logic and the significant role that a billion dollar global fashion industry plays in it. With regard to the apparel industry alone, China is expected to become the world's largest market by 2015 with a size of \$540 billion, with the USA as a more mature market coming third (behind the EU) with \$285 billion (Statistica no date). Mrs Obama's recognition of China as a significant, and in the future dominant, player gives symbolically expression to the material reality of globalization that lies behind this development. Fashion in this symbolic gesture becomes a purely globalized circulation.[3]

Conclusion: Un-Masking the Sovereign

How do we make sense of the sartorial visualisation of sovereignty? After all, according to Foucault,

power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms. Would power be accepted if it were entirely cynical? (Foucault 2012:86)

This suggests that our fascination with First Ladies' fashion choices, with the 'pomp [and] the "ostentatious signs of power"' (Rajchman 1988: 105) only mask the death of the sovereign and the fact that power is no longer owned or possessed by such a figure, but rather exercised within new forms of (globalized) governance. Yet such a position ties the concept of sovereignty too much to the state and its traditional exclusionary iteration. As discussed above, a different, imperial form of sovereignty can be identified as constitutive of an order that, while not abolishing the state, nonetheless re-defines the relationship between inside and outside and makes possible the political governance of globalization. Rather than a 'mask' for a decapitated sovereign, Michelle Obama's fashion diplomacy provides a sartorial symbolic form for this sovereignty, making it visible and appreciable, and providing it with the splendour that sovereign power requires both in its traditional and imperial articulation. And as noted above, the gown worn for the Chinese state dinner very much expressed the involvement of the USA within a globalized (fashion) system characterized by transaction and exchange, rather than the exclusionary logic of traditional sovereignty.

Notes

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NB: This essay is the abbreviated version of a forthcoming book chapter in Andreas Behnke (ed.) *The International Politics of Fashion: Being Fab in a Dangerous World* (London: Routledge 2016).

[1] Cf. Breward and Evans (2005); Crane (2000); Edwards (2011); Stitzel (2005); Svendsen (2006: 75-89).

[2] As Mrs. Obama conceded in a TV show four years after the event, she 'forgot' that she was the First Lady, acknowledging it as her 'biggest fashion regret'; cf. BET.com (2013).

[3] The fact that Mrs Obama wore a Vera Wang gown to the China state dinner in September 2015 does not undermine the argument presented here. While it is plausible to interpret this choice as a gesture of recognition towards their Chinese guests, as Wang is of Chinese extraction, both her personal history as well as her fashion style put her squarely within the American 'fashion system'. She learned her trade with Ralph Lauren before starting her own design studio, focusing primarily on bridal wear. Her 'ethnic identity has never been a feature of her designs or her identity as a designer' (personal email communication from Hazel Clark, 30 September 2015). Her use in the First Lady's fashion diplomacy does therefore not replicate the particular structure of the other, 'hyphenated American' designers. More relevant in this context seems to be Mrs Obama's willingness to assuage the criticism of those commentators that took umbrage at her previous choice of McQueen by choosing an established American designer.

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