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The philosopher’s double cloak: Diderot and Marx on coats, dressing gowns and crisis

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Title
The philosopher's double cloak: Diderot and Marx on coats, dressing gowns and crisis

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Abstract
Thinkers' dismissive stance towards fashion is often the starting point of those theories of fashion that are increasingly contributing to overcome it. However, very rarely even philosophies of fashion dedicate as much as a single thought to the fashion *of philosophers.* This neglected aspect of the everyday life of intellectuals, people of the mind, provides a new interpretive key. This article explores two prominent cases of intellectual celebrities, to whom we turn to especially in times of crisis, personal or public. Diderot famously underwent a personal crisis as a result of a beautiful new silk dressing gown. Marx, on the other hand, often on the verge of destitution, repeatedly pawned his coat – which poignantly also featured at the beginning of Capital as epitome of the commodity that does not keep you warm –, affecting his capacity or otherwise to go and study at the British Museum. These two cases take us directly to the clothed body of two philosophers, and to the struggle, of mind and body, private and public, that led them, via practice, to theory.

Keywords
crisis, Diderot , fashion, intellectuals, Marx, value

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Thinkers' dismissive stance towards fashion is often the starting point of those theories of fashion that are increasingly contributing to overcome it. However, very rarely even philosophies of fashion dedicate as much as a single thought to the fashion *of philosophers.* This neglected aspect of the everyday life of intellectuals, people of the mind, provides a new interpretive key. A specular perspective to address fashion and philosophy not through what philosophers write about fashion – their philosophy of fashion – but what they do with it, intentionally or not – the fashion of philosophers – is what this article explores. It does so through two prominent cases of thinkers that have been in their time and are still among those we can define intellectual celebrities, to whom we turn to especially in times of crisis, personal or public. We tend to see crises as tamed through the focused, impartial gaze of the rational philosopher explaining the forces at play at the macro level. Especially in the popularized forms that become publicly accepted, the intellectuals with their theories are also disembodied: a voice, or even just an abstract mind, taking a stand as if from outside. Yet of course also intellectuals have an intimate life, they too live through struggles and problems, major or apparently inconsequential, like an old coat or a new gown. Like everyone else, and especially when risen to the role of public figures, philosophers must manage, willingly or not, their appearance and come to terms with their embodied experience. Widely quoted is Kant's dismissal of fashion as vanity and folly. Yet Kant himself is *also* known for being always well dressed, "fond of silk shirts and shoes with silver buckles" (Brewer 2019: 131). He also recommended propriety in appearance, and notoriously quipped "better to be a fool within fashion than out of it" (Kant [1785] 2007: 348), an interesting practical counterpoint to his theoretical stance.

The lives of those intellectuals that become icons and exemplars of the good, "the examined", life, generate great curiosity. The history of philosophy and intellectual work broadly conceived is replete of biographical anecdotes, a literary genre only a little less popular than the lives of saints (Riffard 2004). People like to point out the quirks of philosophers, which are many. It is reassuring to find real people, of flesh and bones (and clothes) behind those mysteriously clever brains that otherwise seem to live, precisely, a life exclusively of the mind. This may be at least partly linked to an invidious *voyeurism*, to the consoling effect of seeing "the great man [sic] (and great spirit) in underpants" (Ferraris 2005: x), the liberating effect of bringing theory down to earth in very concrete and understandable terms, and put it to the test of practice in the very person of the philosopher who elaborated it. A critical account of the genre is even more relevant in our times, as embodied, audio-visual representations of intellectual celebrities multiplie with the proliferation of media themselves. Recent studies have indeed thematized, for instance, how contemporary French intellectuals' philosophical identity has been construed in television and how attention to physical appearance matters (Chaplin 2007). Moreover, according to Gibbs (2017) representations of philosophers on film tend to be abstracted and stereotyped illustrations as they rely on assumed audience expectations: "Films about philosophers make an interesting study in this respect [film as mere illustration], as representation makes of the philosopher a psychologized being whose mind transcends his 'Being-in-the-world'" (Ibidem: 273-4).[1]

[1] According to the author this is well exemplified by Roberto Rossellini's *Cartesius*, particularly through sartorial choices: "Descartes' steadfast self-belief and stability of character [is] also reflected in the juxtaposition of his mode of dress throughout with that of the various costumes adopted by the others that he encounters. Indeed, the other characters very much act out the roles of automata that Descartes suspected other people might be, and they even seem to say things solely for the benefit of setting up his rational critique" (Gibbs 2017: 274). Here as in other films on earlier as well as contemporary authors "the image of the philosopher is already oversubscribed in terms of meaning by

Rather than presenting a series of anecdotes or a general overview, this article follows two cases that take us directly to the clothed body of two philosophers, and to the struggle, of mind and body, private and public, that led them, via practice, to theory. Diderot famously underwent a personal crisis because of a beautiful new silk dressing gown that challenged his old comfortable belongings and therefore his identity of indigent philosopher. Marx, on the other hand, often actually on the verge of destitution, repeatedly pawned his coat. His capacity or otherwise to do research and write depended on the whereabouts of his coat, which poignantly also featured at the beginning of *Capital* as epitome of the commodity that does not keep you warm. These cases are illustrative of how this specular perspective – on which a little more in the next section – can expand our knowledge of fashion as well as, through thematizing how philosophers let themselves be seen and make themselves comfortable in the world, our understanding of crucial relationships that both fashion and philosophy, in their different ways, have to address, between theory and practice, individual and collective, mind and body.

The Naked Truth of the Philosopher's Cloak

Socrates, Plato, Kant: among unanimously recognized intellectuals that are regularly proposed as role models and moral exemplars, these names certainly feature. They may be divided by centuries, by space, by school (whilst of course not by gender, see footnote 3) – but they, and many others, are united in their disdain for fashion. This is well known: an acknowledgement of fashion and philosophy's uneasy relationship is the launching pad of those who have decided to confront the issue, even now, when the philosophy of fashion is gaining momentum in the current century (Matteucci and Marino 2016; Svedsen 2006). Moreover, not only in their theories, but often in their own dress choices, philosophers display uneasy and yet typical, therefore relevant, attitudes. Pierre Riffard's study on the intimate lives of philosophers (whose Italian translation cover revealingly features a pair of idle feet in holed socks) finds that they differ much in their attitude to dress and to opening their private lives to the public, but he argues that overall their "intimate relationship to their body is one of struggle, to gain control over it" (Riffard 2004: 252, my trans.). This becomes particularly clear in the rather ascetic version of the philosopher's look which characterizes its beginning.

Having already recalled Kant, we can turn to the "cradle of Western civilization". Here the philosopher's cloak is introduced, already as a dual character. Either as a metaphor – a proxy for all that is transient and of little value, what the body is to the soul, in Plato's *Phaedo* – but also concretely as Socrates' and then more generally philosophers' chosen way not to be distracted by such bodily, transient, trivialities. Socrates, again Plato informs us, particularly scorned any attention to exterior appearance, opting for minimal clothing as well as minimal grooming, despising "smart clothes and shoes and other bodily ornaments" (Plato, *Republic,* cit. in Hanson 1990: 114). And yet, ironically, in so doing Socrates sparked a fashion of sorts, a fashion for the philosophical appearance. He launched what remains history's most recognizable look of the philosopher. This

preconceptions concerning their representation, such that the viewer feels compelled to reduce it/them to one interpretation or another, to its essence" (Ibidem: 275).

was minimal and bold in equal measure: a draped *himation* or *tribon*, a raw cloak, without the tunic (*chiton*) generally worn underneath, so as to expose a naked torso, and barefoot. All complemented with long beard and long hair (Diogene Laertius [200] 2013, book VI). This distinctive attire of the philosopher remained so dominant as to amount almost to a work coat or uniform for a long time. It became particularly fashionable in early Christian Rome, where it was called *pallium* and selected by philosophers against the "posher" and more worldly toga[2] (Urbano 2017). It does not really matter that it had been, in Socrates and his followers' intentions, a refusal of (what today we call) fashion. It still has the main features of fashion: it was chosen; it was imitated; it was used as a means of distinction. You could spot a philosopher by the fact he[3] was wearing the *himation* in that peculiar way. Overall, as an anti-outfit it was invested with meaning, it symbolized a refusal of all things petty, worldly, superficial. In short, possibly the more mainstream uniform for a philosopher that ever was, the *himation* was not just cloth, but clothing inscribed with shared meaning, clothing becoming fashion *ante litteram* (on the sociological distinction between clothing and fashion see Kawamura 2005), or "written clothing" (Barthes 1967, the classic reference that has informed generations of scholars of fashion).

As Nikolas Pappas argues in his book – a rare case of focus on this subject, mainly devoted to classic Greek antiquity – titled *The Philosopher' New Clothes*, evoking Andersen famous fable, it did also not matter that the philosopher's look aimed effectively at nudity. Or, better, it matters in the sense that by making nudity meaningful – and according to Plato one of the three signs of true Greekness, along with language and homosexuality – it too becomes a custom, an outfit of sorts (Pappas 2014). After all, do not we associate the act of thinking with nudity? Recall for instance Rodin's much reproduced statue of the *Thinker*. So, if philosophical nudity is not a dress, it is fashion, as the inescapable necessity to manage one's presence and identity socially (as classics go, on this see also Goffman 1959) as well as a chosen way to establish a certain fit between body and environment, to make oneself comfortable with one's surroundings (for more recent work specifically on fashion see Entwistle 2000; Olberding 2015; Eicher 2021). Moreover, philosophers deal with truth, and truth too is *naked.* The tropes of naked truth and naked philosopher held so strong for so long in the public imaginary, that when in 18th century France "fans" led by Mme Necker decided to crowdfund a statue of Voltaire,[4] his colleague Diderot encouraged the sculptor Pigalle to produce a portrait *à l'ancienne* (a nude), explicitly evoking the superior significance of the naked body, its vicinity to natural, naked truth. The public reaction to the finished statue was one of outrage, interestingly. However the reason for that, rather than a *pruderie* hardly befitting Enlightened times, may be interpreted as a rather modern rejection of the aging, frail body, as 76 years old Voltaire was portrayed with extremely naturalistic detail (Scherf 2011). This reaction to a deviation from the

[2] Tertullian (155-220 AD), author of early Latin Christian scholarship, explained why he selected the pallium as opposed to the toga in a dedicated book, *De Pallio* (see Riffard 2004).

[3] It was of course a 'he' – something that has not changed as much as one would hope as we approach contemporary times. Indeed, the stereotype of the philosopher remains male, making it harder for women to *pass*, even in their appearance, as philosophers. See Riffard (2004), who presents, but somehow also reinforces with his selection of cases, the stereotype of the male philosopher. Similarly anecdotal, and selective, is Onfray (2019) written for a wider public as a history of philosophy through a portrait gallery of (exclusively male) philosophers. For an entry point in the debate at the intersection of gender, fashion and philosophy, an analysis that considers not only the theories, but also the lives and bodies of philosophers can be found in Olberding (2015).

[4] The word choice here is intentionally anachronistic, to evoke an image of the phenomenon closer to our celebrity culture and bottom-up initiative. Still, it is the case that admirers of Voltaire launched a public subscription campaign to finance his marble statue. Similarly, some argue that to talk of fashion in ancient times is anachronistic, and in certain usages it may well be – what we often call the fashion system for instance is a much more recent phenomenon – but not in the sense of the social meanings clothing assumes in human cultures and its function as a changeable marker of both distinction and belonging. On this definitional dispute see Pappas (2008).

typical representation of the naked thinker through the particular case of the male body in his prime also shows the violence of its generalization, which emerges when trying this particular "outfit" on different bodies, such as aging, or female.

If the nakedness of the thinkers mostly remained a metaphor, a new uniform had by this time also established itself for intellectual celebrities, artists and writers, one that is similarly an overall shield and a form of *undress*:

The dressing gown was the garment of choice for writers and artists in the eighteenth century. They not only wore them; they elected to have themselves represented for posterity in them. In philosophy, the robe was, of course, more than ordinary clothing; it was a model object, standing in for the body in metaphysical debates about the immortality of the soul. […] The dressing gown, as a form of undress worn in the 'withdrawn' space of the cabinet was loosely coded as well as loose fitting: it purported to represent the person 'behind' appearances, with only the qualities and talents nature had bestowed (Scott 2016: 201-2)

We shall come back to the dressing gown and the protective shield it provided to intellectuals, one in particular. Yet we all face this necessity to present ourselves to the world and to look for ways to be comfortable in it and in our body. Philosophers' uncharacteristic denial to delve into this topic of common concern seems to hide deeper reasons than their dismissal of it as superficial reveals. Karen Hanson, in a thoughtful article on the philosophical fear of fashion singles out its important facets: suspicion of change, anxiety about the inessential and passing (death included), summed up in disdain or even denial of the body (Hanson 1990: 107). So the willful ignorance of philosophers about fashion – they who like to examine everything – is seen by Hanson as an active removal of something much more fundamental:

Clothing is a part of our difficult, post-Edenic lives; and dress, stationed at a boundary between self and other, marking a distinction between private and public, individual and social, is likely to be vexed by the forces of border wars […] A personal interest in dress and open responsiveness to the changing whims of fashion depend upon the recognition that one is *seen*, that one is – among other things – an *object* of others' sight, others' cognition. The activity of philosophy may engender a deep antipathy to the acknowledgement of personal passivity, an acknowledgement required for this recognition. And yet we humans *are* seen – no one is really just a seer (Hanson 1990: 119).

The cases that follow, as they explore two great philosophers in circumstances of fragility, self-reflection or crises linked precisely to their own embodiment and social identity takes Hanson's argument seriously, also suggesting that both fashion and philosophy may thus be seen in different ways through this lens. To look at the self-presentation of philosophers is therefore not just a way to examine their peculiarity and their work, but rather a way to highlight their commonality, as cases of a shared humanity, unveiling patterns of representation that often become constraining and alienating. Amy Olberding (2015) provides useful material here, also in terms of bridging the chasm often created between seeing/being seen and being in the world, and between the meaning clothing and stuff more generally carry for the self and for others. Her objective is to study how stereotypical social roles – such as the very strong biases surrounding how philosophers should look like – may drive to alienation from their material environment those who fall outside the stereotype, those for whom it is much more likely that those two meanings, for self and for others, are or become at odds. In the terms of the ancient metaphor, dismissing the cloak as a body, makes it

easier to then discard the body as a cloak – except that what is easy *in the abstract* may not be so as lived experience, as the two cases in this article will show.[5]

Marx's two coats

There is no better case to start from than Marx, whose troubled relationship with a particular item of clothing might be more entwined with the development of his thinking than we could imagine. In Karl Marx's (1818-1883) life there are two significant coats. Their significance rests on a third, more elusive one, easy to forget, and that Marx himself might have liked to forget if he could. But let us start from the first coat.

So, first, there is a coat, the one that Marx wore to go out in winter during his years in London, where he had moved with his family. Here he dedicated himself to his research for *Capital,* conducted mainly at the British Museum's Reading Room. This is an actual coat, made of a sturdy fabric – we can imagine – of a good make but certainly well-worn and full of *memories* – as the folds on one's garments that had become permanent with use were called (Stallybrass 1998: 196). The coat was fundamental to keep Marx warm, and also to provide him with the look of a respectable citizen, fit to enter the British Museum for which at the time a ticket, or access pass, was required. We have few images remaining of Marx, they are all posed photographs of an era when these where still rare (one is a daguerreotype) – and we know from his letters to Engels and his daughters that he cared about how he looked in these, and sometimes sent copies to friends and family commenting on the image. We also know that he cared for clothes and quality. Upon receiving a legacy in 1864 Marx wrote "I should very much like to buy Manchester silk for the *whole* family" (Marx 1985 [1860-64]: 527).[6] Marx certainly knew the value of a good coat.

Yet, most different to this first coat, there is the coat as commodity, of which Marx writes about in the First book of *Capital*, published in 1867 – specifically in Chapter One "The commodity". In Section 2 when he needs an example of commodity, the coat is the first in mind: "Let us take two commodities such as a coat and 10 yards of linen, and let the former be double the value of the latter, so that, if 10 yards of linen= W, the coat =2 W" (Marx [1867] 1976: 157). Marx continues to play with this equivalence between coat and linen for the rest of the chapter, adding other equivalences (amounts of tea, of gold, of wheat) to get to the heart of the enigma of the equivalent form, money and capital ultimately. The conclusion is that the capacity of a coat to be an equivalent, exchangeable with anything else (linen, tea, gold…), comes at the price of losing the coat's "natural" "property of being heavy, or the capacity to keep us warm" (Ibidem) – or, to use the specific term that was being elaborated, of surrendering its *use value*. This is not a coat that can be worn or shown with a picture, just with an equivalence. As Peter Stallybrass pithily summarises, in Capital "The coat

[5] One cannot but be reminded of Max Weber's poignant closing passage in his theory of the spread of capitalism as a dominant way of life: "care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the 'saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.' But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage" (Weber [1904-05] 2001: 123). Before Weber, both Marx and Diderot confront a similar cloak (a coat, a dressing gown, both proxies for our relationship with "external goods", that give us both sensory comfort and a social shape) that is becoming for them an iron cage – and prompts them to both uncover this, force it open with their writings and, through that, find escapes that are not just for exceptions, for "saints", but collective solutions.

[6] We know from the letters of Marx's wife Jenny that he liked being asked to send copies of his photos to family and friends, and the few images that remain are indeed all well-finished portraits. His friend and collaborator Wilhelm Liebknecht commented. "I do not know a single bad photograph of Marx. All show him how he was because he always showed himself how he was. All images of Marx are good" (https://marx200.org/en/fotografien).

makes its appearance not as the object that is made and work but as the commodity that is exchanged. And, what defines the coat as a commodity, for Marx, is that you cannot wear it and it cannot keep you warm" (Stallybrass 1998: 183).[7] The two coats are one and the same to a superficial look. Yet, between the two coats there's incommensurable distance, they belong to two different worlds, and it was Marx that taught us that.

Marx's insight is perhaps due to a third coat, that in bridging between the two also made tangible the distance that separates them. This other coat provides the link that showed to Marx how the actual coat and the commodity coat could transform into eachother, whilst remaining forever on parallel planes and never to meet. This third coat is what Marx took, again and again, across several years, in an out of a pawnshop in exchange for much needed cash for food, heating and other life's necessities – sometimes in order to buy writing paper so that he could earn money with his journalism (Draper 1985, cit. in Stallybrass 1998). Because, as is well known, Marx was not well off, and especially in the years when he was writing *Capital*, really struggled economically. Like in many of the working class families he wrote about, many employed in the textile industry that was the pillar of England's capitalism, one of Marx's household emergency solutions when short of money was to pawn valuable items: silver, watches, linen, clothes. Marx's family was a recurrent client of the pawnshop throughout the 1850s and early 1860s. His overcoat was a prime item of exchange: "And his overcoat directly determined what work he could or could not do. If his overcoat was at the pawnshop during the winter, he could not go to the British Museum. If he could not go to the British Museum, he could not undertake the research for *Capital*. What clothes Marx wore thus shaped what he wrote" (Stallybrass 1998: 188). Sometimes it was his daughters' clothes that were pawned, and then they could not go school. No wonder Marx became a champion of material determinism and that a coat is the main example of the first chapter of *Capital*.

The pawned coat was not quite his real coat – he could not use it; it did not keep him warm. The pawned coat was also not quite a commodity either, what it got exchanged for was not another commodity for its use value, but money, the general equivalent, pure exchange value. Perhaps, to develop his theory of the commodity with that piercing acumen, Marx needed to go through the logorating, for his coat and for him, experience of repeatedly pawning it, to see his – we assume cherished – coat turned into a commodity, into mere exchange value, again and again, in that liminal form of the pawned coat. Perhaps it was that experience that made him see what a radical transformation it was from coat to commodity, its violence and its alienating effect, even more so as it was a reversible transformation requiring every time human labour and complicity in letting something valued for itself turn into something equivalent to anything else potentially, and in that process devaluing the human element, human non-exchangeability along with the use value of objects. A coat hostage at a pawn shop is a coat hostage to exchange value: exchange values should be transitory, then things should go back to their use values; but they do not. This is the real, enchanting trap of commodity fetishism. The problem is not fetishism – it is OK to love soft Manchester silk and a warm coat, and the respectable, enabling identity they provide you and your family – the problem is commodification, being forever trapped in the possibility (or necessity, in Marx's case) of exchange (on the frequent misunderstandings of the concept of fetishism of commodity see again Stallybrass 1998). By its recurrence, the act of pawning kept alive the *liquidation* of use value by exchange value that normally is confined in the act of selling and buying, and it so doing exposed it to Marx's penetrating analysis – as a perhaps extreme case of a

[7] And also: "In the place of a coat, there was a transcendental value that erased both the making and the wearing of the coat. *Capital was Marx's attempt to give back the coat to its owner*" (Stallybrass 1998: 187; my emphasis)

mechanism that he then places as the basis of capitalism as a form of social, not just economic, organization.

It is interesting that it should be precisely a coat at the centre: a coat, as far as items of clothing go, is very much connected to identity and to our public identity in particular – for Marx the immigrant in London especially. Like Socrate's cloak, like the coat that the king of Sweden offered to add to Voltaire's marble portrait (Goodman 1986), like Schelling's coat Benjamin wrote about,[8] it has all the elements to become a recognizable uniform, even an armor of sorts. It is the outermost layer, both protective and 'offensive', an instrument to face the world and claim one's place there.[9] Seen in this light the parallel with the following case, that superficially appears the opposite, occasioned as it is by a crisis not of destitution but of sudden luxury, and involving a dressing gown rather than a coat, starts to appear.[10]

Diderot's two dressing gowns

Another enlightening case is that of another great materialist, whom Marx himself, as it happens, listed as his favourite writer:[11] Denis Diderot. Diderot is at the centre of a renowned *affair* concerning an item of clothing, a dressing gown – which as we have seen has a prominent place in the intellectual habitus[12] – having himself written a short memoir about one he loved and lost. The enigmatic if 'chatty' text (*bavard* in Diderot's own words; for details in the complex circumstances of its circulation, unauthorized publication, unclear attributions and critical fortune, see Scott 2016) stimulated analyses and speculations, and inspired in the anthropology of modern consumerism the concepts of "Diderot effect" and "Diderot unities". Let us turn to these Diderot-inspired concepts first. "Diderot unities" are "highly consistent complements of consumer goods", held together by their reciprocal consistency. To ensure this, a spiral trajectory of consumption is unleashed, the "Diderot effect", a "coercive force that maintains them. The unity and the effect…are key instruments with which culture controls consumption" (McCracken 1988: 118). In particular, the Diderot effect is activated when a familiar consumption pattern is thrown into crisis. Possessions

[8] Schellings's coat is captured by a photo, then given meaning by Benjamin: "The very creases in people's clothes have an air of permanence. Just consider Schelling's coat: It will surely pass into immortality along with him: the shape it has borrowed from its wearer is not unworthy of the creases in his face" (Benjamin [1931] 1999: 514).

[9] Jenny Marx perceptively comments on this aspect, also shining a light on the atmosphere in the Marx's household, a topic that has since been the object of many books and films, in a letter to Liebknecht: "In all these struggles, the harder because the pettier part falls to us women. While the men are invigorated by the fight in the world outside, strengthened by coming face to face with the enemy, be its number legion, we sit at home darning stockings" (cit. in Stallybrass 1998: 198).

[10] The link is noted in passing here: "In a certain light Diderot's dressing gowns seem to prefigure Marx's coat, which, in the first volume of Capital's the dual form of commodities - 'at the same time objects of utility and bearers of value' - reason no doubt for the essay's anthologization in the Marxists Internet Archive (Scott 2016: 188).

[11] Common in Victorian England were semi-serious questionnaires as social pastime called *Confessions*. A number of these *Confessions* filled out by Marx have been preserved in the diary of his daughter; in them the named 'prose writer you like best' is Diderot. Marx in particular shared with Hegel a predilection for Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau.* See: www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1865/04/01.htm.

[12] The dressing gown features as an entry in the catalog of celebrities' frivolities by Giuseppe Scaraffia (2016), echoing Roland Barthes *mythologies*. Indeed, the dressing gown had its dedicated place in one of the last seminars on the novel at the Collège de France of Barthes, of whom there is also a famous photo portrayed, young and radiant in his dressing gown, in front of bookshelves. Simone De Beauvoir too – which for her complex stance on fashion, in theory and practice, would have been an interesting third case (see Church Gibson 2012) – also declared to love writing in her dressing gown, and is portrayed wearing a flaming red one in many a book cover.

cluster around a certain consistency or complementarity as they are expression of the consumer's identity; therefore if one new item is introduced, deviating from the established unity, in order to maintain that consistency a chain reaction starts. An example is the chain reaction after the sudden introduction of a new item as a gift more luxurious than the average belongings of a person. Excess spending and continual trading up is the result, as purchasing specific consumer goods becomes instrumental to fulfilling an ideal of the good life (Lorenzen 2015). The Diderot effect has been used to explain phenomena of overconsumption and their negative social, psychological, environmental impacts.

Why are these named after the French Enlightenment philosopher? And can its origin tell us something different about the phenomenon, that sees people trapped in a spiral of overconsumption they have little control or awareness of? The story is a well-known tale of an identity crisis, sparked, of all things, by a new dressing gown. Denis Diderot (1713-1784) was then the established philosopher and founder, with D'Alambert, of the *Encyclopedie* project, that kept him busy for twenty years. He was already the public intellectual still quoted today, and of whom there are almost more painted portraits than photos of Marx. At the height of his career, with the work on the *Encyclopedie* mostly done, middle-aged Diderot had not much time for fashion or luxury, living a free but rather modest, we could say bohemian, life. In *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre* [R*egrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown*]*,* written in 1767, he describes himself as someone who just loves to be at his writing desk, always wearing his dressing gown, old and tattered, a trusty and comfortable work suit. That same year, his artist friend Michel Loo paints what is probably the most reproduced of Diderot's many portraits. Diderot reviews this painting, in one of his *Salons*, the art criticism he wrote of Paris art exhibitions. He finds it beautiful but not truthful, also notably in the richness of the silky dressing gown depicted – a studio prop the artist used in many paintings, and not Diderot's real one (Miller 2002, cit. in Scott 2016: 204). The painting was perhaps visionary: Mme Geoffrin, one of the main sponsors of the *Encyclopedie* and a regular visitor of Diderot's, had noticed his lack of luxuries, and decided to gift him with a beautiful, ostentatious scarlet silk gown. Moreover, she also provided new furniture, new décor to go with it (the "Diderot unity"). The modest, even indigent, unity of before was so unbalanced by the arrival of the new dressing gown, against which everything he owned before seemed ill suited, that the new flurry of luxurious objects was indeed needed (the "Diderot effect"). With lighthearted irony, Diderot laments this effect of which he finds himself a victim and revealingly starts his semi-serious lament:

> "Why didn't I keep her? She was made for me; I was made for her. She hugged the line of every fold of my body without hemming me in. I looked a picture. I looked my best. The other one is stiff and heavy and makes a manikin of me … When the ink had clogged and refused to flow from my pen, she would offer her skirt. Long black stripes visibly recorded the many favours she had done me. The black stripes were the sign of the critic, the writer, the working man. Now, I look like a rich layabout; nobody knows who I am… I was the absolute master of my old dressing gown; I have become the slave of the new one" (Diderot [1767] 2016: 177-8).

Self and stuff became disconnected. Diderot does not feel like himself in the new gown, the "feedback loop regarding value and identity" "between self and stuff'" (Olberding 2015: 695) now conveys a conflict, stuff is no longer representative and does not sustain the established self-understanding; in the new robe Diderot feels like an impostor, "a rich layabout" that nobody recognizes. "Unity" is mentioned as the value that is lost: "Now all is discord. The overall effect is lost. There's no longer any *unity* or beauty" (Diderot [1767] 2016: 178; my emphasis). Restoring a

unity (the "Diderot unity") requires, it seems, taking the road of self-alienation, surrounding himself with more and more luxury, as "the philosopher's edifying little retreat was transformed into the scandalous chambers of a tax-farmer (Diderot [1767] 2016: 180). For a moment, what has to give in the end seems to be the self, and *Regret* is written as a pauperist ironic warning for those who might be tempted (it is subtitled *Advice to those with more taste than fortune*). Diderot poses like a modern Diogenes, the cynic philosopher evoked for moral guidance and strength, and seems to accept the lighthearted sermon on the dangers of luxury which is given as the pretext for the composition in a preface by the editor Grimm at the time of publication in 1772.[13] Diderot first declares that he is prepared to return it all, except a painting by his friend Vernet, depicting a scene of narrow escape after the storm, much as the storm just raged on his surrounding and described in the text: "Take it all back, yes all of it, except the Vernet. Ah. Leave me the Vernet! It wasn't the artist who made it, but you [God]" (Diderot [1767] 2016: 181). What are we to make of this apparently contradictory stance?

> [Diderot] affects a careless disinterest for all but the [painting by] Vernet which, he insists, must be left with him […] The *Regrets* is a strangely defensive text, couched as an analogue of the narrative of peril that Diderot reads out of (or into) the Vernet painting. It is about being safe and in control, expressed though the master metaphor of ownership, with its various permutations: owning, buying, being given, being owned; and their negative moral equivalents: being compromised, defined and misevalued (McLelland 1988, 140).

Diderot then proceeds with a long, lyrical description of the painting and of how now people come to see him just to see this beautiful work of art. He achieves a double trick, at the same time displaying the typical philosophical detachment from appearance and material objects and yet also a philosophical acumen in recognizing and valuing an attachment to objects (the regretted old dressing gown, and this one painting by Vernet) based on different premises, and therefore not as corrupting as luxury for luxury's sake (or we might say, for the Diderot unity's sake). In fact at the very end, he says that even the Vernet's material possession can be given away, the philosopher owns it, but is not owned by it and would be happy to cede it so somebody who would appreciate it more than himself. In art, appreciation is real ownership – echoing the *Encyclopedie's* preface warning that authority come from knowledge not titles (Scott 2016 :202-03). This echo also shows what really counts in this twisty tale. A Diderot's unity indeed, but the one he can perceive in the painting – about which the term "unity" appears again, in the affirmative: "If you could see the beautiful *unity* in this painting, how harmonious it all is, how all the effects work together, how effortlessly and artlessly everything calls for our attention" (Diderot [1767] 2016: 182; my emphasis).

Whilst the "dressing gown, once introduced into Diderot's everyday domesticity, transforms it by substitution and growth into *a storehouse of goods*" (Scott 2016: 188; my emphasis), the philosopher frees himself from that not via the simple route of mere renunciation, as he declares to begin with. Aesthetic appreciation of the Vernet reveals that the problem is not, as it is often assumed and as Diderot himself initially suggests, luxury per se, rather a more subtle transformation in Diderot's – and as this is written as a warning for the reader, in our – relationship with our closest

[13] There are two short but contradictory prefaces to *Regrets*, one attributing the episode to as expression of gratitude of Diderot to Mme Geoffrin for her presents; the other declaring the text is Diderot's retort to visitors sermonizing him for his new luxuries. As Scott (2016) prudently and convincingly notes, given the evidence and the literary conventions of the time (and of the specific author), it is also equally possible that Diderot himself wrote both peritexts and is thus staging the whole scene for us. Scholarship researching external evidence has not been able to clarify the exact circumstances of the whole affair, which also explains why it is often retold in diverging ways; see also McLelland (1988) for a reconstruction.

material surroundings. That is the real danger of the "standards of taste", that were then animating the debate and Diderot explicitly recalls. As in Marx's case we had to go via a ghostly third coat to grasp the relationship of the first two, here, to understand Diderot's complex attitude toward his two gowns, and more generally his old and new possessions, we have to go via one of the latter, though one he, apparently, acquired himself and perhaps even inspired ("the philosopher had given the artist the idea, and the painter had given the philosopher the painting" (Diderot [1767] 2016: 177). Like in the case of Marx's commodity fetishism, the problem is not fetishism, being seduced, as Diderot is, by the sumptuousness of the silk gown or, as he is happier to confess, the beauty of the Vernet. The problem is that the 'standards of taste' transform these objects as a unity into 'a storeroom of goods', where he is no longer the master of the old gown but a manikin for the new one. However, Diderot finds in the aesthetic unity of the painting, and the attitude its appreciation stimulates, a much more fitting correspondence with his identity, and a more fitting way out of the crisis. One very much in line with his chosen role as public intellectual that through the *Encyclopedie* upholds the emancipating role of knowledgeable appreciation.

Concluding remarks

The two cases are peculiarly specular: there we had a coat, an item to go out in the world, here we have a dressing gown, an equally all-encompassing (physically and symbolically as a marker of identity) but intimate item, and ultimately used to defend a private identity against one imposed, with the best intentions, by a social stereotype. The crises are both external, but in one case is poverty, in the other sudden luxury; one is enshrined in the serious tone of critical analysis, the other in the ambiguous and ironic mood of a *divertissement*. Reprising Olberding's (2015) setting of the problem as recalled in the first section, both cases all show moments or conditions where the fit between the identity conveyed by the philosopher's clothes to themselves and to others breaks down, in reality or imagination, and there is a crisis or a moment of reckoning; adjustment is needed.

The two cases share this: they show us two intellectuals living through crises (be it destitution or sudden luxury) and finding ways to fashion themselves with the circumstances they are given, and fashion their theories at the same time, showing how they too are entwined with their intimate experience. They are potential role models for our experience too, which is why we are attracted to everyday details of intellectuals' lives. Their personal lives are embedded in wider crises: industrial revolution, epochal shift; different sorts of change on a critical and global scale surrounded their lives and animate their sartorial adventures. We turn for guidance to what public intellectuals, present and past, tell us and show us; we turn to them for their thinking but also as fellow human beings, who like us must lead their lives, as living creatures that need food, shelter and clothes. When a crisis or a situation of disconnect emerges, superficial and necessary, superfluous and profound recombine in ways that the self-deceptive triumphalism of non-critical, well-adjusted times is allowed, or allows itself, to ignore. By focusing on the clothed bodies and not just the brains out of which theories emerge gives them a whole different substance. Something as superficial as a coat – literally the outer layer – suddenly is threaded down to the inner weaving of its owner's theory, as we see in Marx's poignant case. Meaning is itself made much more concrete, specific and embodied (a "use value") – and necessary. What emerges is a necessity to fashion oneself, although, as again Marx would say, not "under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx [1852] 1963).

As Charles Wright Mills might say, to feel a *crisis*, either as personal trouble or as public issue, one has to have a clear sense that shared values are threatened (Mills [1959] 2000). A crisis in this sense is not

general confusion, suffering, or unease, it is a specific condition that needs, first of all, that what is under threat – possibly simply by transformation rather than destruction – be clarified. And in order to do so, the sociological imagination recommends that we recognize, disentangle and then translate into each other, that is re-connect, personal and public. Which is what Diderot and Marx both did as their personal troubles, literal or literary, made them aware of specific crises that were the personal translation of wider issues in society. If the philosophical fear of fashion is deep-seated, crises make us face fears that we otherwise avoid, till we can. Marx because of his coat and Diderot because of his gown faced this issue of being confronted with their own bodily limitations and necessity, facing both material and cultural obstacles and finding ways to work with them – weaving them into their writings and lives. For very different reasons, and following different crises, both *had* to think about belongings (and belonging) and as such confront their own embodied existence. Their theories are informed by that and better for that. And, for us, our choices of with which theories and clothes we want to fashion our lives can also be more aware, given circumstances we cannot choose, but that we can elaborate, challenge, make sense of – to find unity and keep warm.

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