

# Fashionable Feminism

Lynne Clive (Marilynn Rashid)

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How quickly and easily feminism, like all ideology, is used to affirm the language of power and powerlessness. The superficiality and marketability of its demands have been evident since its inception; but now feminism is being used to openly celebrate middle and upper class comfort, to revel in consumerism and the empty benefits of capitalism.

In an article entitled “Our Bodies, Our Clothes: Fashion and Feminism” in the *Utne Reader* for Aug./Sept. 1986, Judith Levine makes an insulting equation between the beauty of women’s bodies, the necessity for sexual freedom, and the mindless pursuit of fashion and style.

“Indeed,” she claims, “as many feminists and radicals have begun to concede, buying is not in itself a desperate act compelled by false consciousness.” But, of course, it is precisely that; and if feminists and radicals have begun to “concede,” then they are making concessions and humiliating ones at that. Levine quotes writer Kate Ellis: “Consumerism speaks to some things that are positive in me, that I don’t want to get rid of. Even in a feminist utopian state, people will want to buy new things.”

This feminist envisions a utopia founded on the very precepts that have created our present misery. By advocating consumerism, calling her hoped-for utopia a “state,” and by professing a passion for acquiring things “new,” she essentially paves the way for more of the same—a highly structured technological world based on wage labor and production, a world of continued domination.

Levine then gives credence to Ellis’ rationalizations: “Collecting new records, using up-to-date technology, or decorating one’s house in current design gives one the sense of engagement in the present, indeed, expresses a spirit of hope about the future.” Such diversionary obsessive activity cannot truly engage one in the present, but can only give one “a sense of engagement in the present”; it cannot express hope for the future, but can merely express “a spirit of hope” for the future because it ensnares its victims in the illusions of its successes and robs them of their autonomy and their individual creativity. Consumers are perpetually disengaged from their present reality and blind to their daily participation in the nexus of domination. Consumerism is the necessary other half of wage labor.

There is a pointed irony in successful professional “liberated” women from the wealthiest nation-state in the world smugly wallowing in the frenzy of commodity consumption while women (and men and children) starve not only in places like Africa and India but perhaps right down the street, and while women (and men and children) flee from US-backed death squads in Central America. Stating that “clothes, the trappings of established social hierarchies, may also be the flags of revolt” is a less than clever obfuscation.

There is never any mention made of what one might be revolting against. Taking on the guise of revolt is merely another option for “free” individuals under capital.

Finally, Levine boldly suggests a tolerant and indulgent direction that women’s fashion consciousness should take: “Feminist fashion should encourage an individualized, unconstricted sexual expression—we may be breastless Amazons today if we wish, and tomorrow, gaudy ‘bad girls.’”

What a pathetic, yet somehow particularly apt paean to the accomplishments of feminism. "We" obviously don't know who we are anymore. We are lost in a dizzying maze of vapid choices that promise to mask the actual misery and alienation of our lives. It is not only sexism, but consumption, wage work, fashion and style that rob us of our bodies and ourselves, of each other and of our connections with our world.

"Just as bread earned by work tastes acidly of sweat and wages, marketable pleasures are more tedious than the boredom it costs to produce them. The survival-pleasures swindle is part of the lie of abstract freedom. The history we lead with every turn of the wheel is not the history of our desires but rather of a lifeless civilization which is about to bury us under its dead weight...The more life decays, the more the market reckons on the scarcity of intense pleasure and multiplies the number of survival pleasures on offer; which, as they are sold and bought, turn instantly to constraint and work...The emancipation of pleasure demands the annihilation of mercantile civilization." (Raoul Vaneigem, *The Book of Pleasures*)

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