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Clothes and re-negotiations of the social order in seventeenth-century Tallinn

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Astrid Pajur, *Dress Matters: Clothes and Social Order in Tallinn, 1600–1700*, Studia Historica Upsaliensia 269 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis). 279 pp.

Up to this day, dress matters and has complex social connotations. Arguably this was even more true of the early modern period, when clothes powerfully affected moral, religious, social, familial, reproductive, and economic aspects of life. They also had gendered implications, with sumptuary laws often focusing on female vanity. But across Europe and beyond, when the authorities attempted to use the law to limit what men and women could wear, their central concern was social order. In their view the effects of clothes were not limited to the wearer but had consequences for the whole society.

Early modern dress and its surveillance have been subject to extensive research by John Styles, Daniel Roche, Margaret Spufford, Renata Ago, and many others. These scholars have explored the relationship between ideas about order and sumptuary laws, and, in addition, shown that clothes were important social and economic resources that transcended, and at times, transgressed social boundaries.[1] In her recently defended doctoral thesis *Dress Matters: Clothes and Social Order in Tallinn, 1600–1700*, Astrid Pajur makes an important contribution to this literature. By choosing Tallinn, formerly Reval, as her "laboratory", she refocuses the perspective away from the classic research on urban centres in the West and Northwest of Europe. Tallinn had a multi-ethnic population and a complex social structure char-

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1. John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-century England* (New Haven 2007); Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge 1994); Margaret Spufford & Susan Mee, *The Clothing of the Common Sort: 1570–1700* (Oxford 2017); Renata Ago, *Gusto for Things: A History of Objects in Seventeenth-century Rome* (Chicago 2013), amongst others.

acterized by guild-based organisations and governance.[2] She shows that, as in other towns, appearance, especially clothes, played an essential part in making social hierarchy visible. But she also raises important questions as to how this supposedly strict social hierarchy worked in practice and allowed social mobility. Pajur makes the claim that Tallinn, though it was a corporate society, was nevertheless quite dynamic and that ideas of order were neither clear-cut nor unchanging. They had to be negotiated and the uncertainties about boundaries created considerable flexibility in clothing practice.

Pajur uses clothes and their materiality as a lens to examine people, ideas, and practices with respect to social order. Clothes made differences legible and communicated social status, but they could also subvert and threaten normative views of the social order. At the same time, she argues, clothes were themselves "dynamic agents" and not only communicated but also interacted with hierarchy, structuring the daily lives of people in multiple ways, whether as social performance, as economic resources, or as treasured gifts or bequests. Clothes created and embodied personal memories and they contributed to individual identity, the formation of networks, and communal belonging.

This view of a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between clothes and the social order calls for attention to a multiplicity of sources, and Pajur takes pains to interlink sumptuary laws, probate inventories, wills, and court records, as well as contemporary illustrations and surviving objects. This methodology, the analysis of different types of sources by way of their combination, marks a novel achievement of the thesis. And yet, the data show multiple and at times contradictory results which can largely but not wholly be resolved by a combined quantitative and qualitative examination. Still, by researching law as well as practice, Pajur achieves top-down as well as bottom-up perspectives on the way clothes contributed to shaping the social order.

Tallinn was remarkably ethnically diverse in the seventeenth century including Germans and Swedes (around 60 percent of the urban population), and Estonians, Finns, Livonians and other groups (around 40 percent). The latter 40 percent were considered "undeutsch" and not of the same legal and social status as Germans and Swedes. Although by the seventeenth century Tallinn had ceased to be a part of the greatly weakened Hanseatic League, the town nevertheless continued to see a regular influx of commodities and merchants retained their dominant social status. Tallinn was stratified, with a strong elite, a middling and lower middling group with many artisans, and

2. Similar to Sheilagh Ogilvie's assessment of early modern Bohemia and Württemberg, Astrid defines Tallinn's society as corporatist, see for example Sheilagh Ogilvie, *State Corporatism and Proto-Industry: The Württemberg Black Forest, 1580–1797* (Cambridge 2006).

a lower group consisting of craftsmen of Estonian origin, most of them not part of any guild, labourers, and servants. Several elements complicated this social order, however, including ethnicity, the status of burghers, gender, and occupational diversity within the guilds. This complex social order as well as competition for political influence and conflict amongst the factions created a fairly dynamic social structure.

Pajur's analysis of the eight seventeenth-century sumptuary laws reveals a changing normative social order and a society of multiple layers and intersections. This is especially visible in the 1665 law. Analysing this and other laws, Pajur uncovers a highly complex social hierarchy with multiple attributes at play, including guild membership, occupation, length of career, burgher status, political influence, marital status, gender, and ethnicity. This left scope for negotiation and interpretation and consequently, although clothes were expected to create social order, they did so along lines not always congruent with the corporate system.[3] Gender, for example, illustrates how convoluted the situation could be. Especially at the beginning of the century, women were defined by the guild membership of their husbands or fathers but also by marital status: being unmarried or married was visible in their appearance. Ethnicity also made a difference; wives and daughters of Estonian artisans were supposed to dress like servants, a powerful symbol of their inferior status. Finally, whether one was local or foreign entailed different regulation. This created a complex visual hierarchy with differing expectations for men and women.

The allocation of rights to wear certain fabrics and accessories created an even more complex picture. Pajur collates all the fabric types mentioned in the sumptuary laws and shows fluctuating arrangements over time. Striking are two markers of distinction, silk and sable, which appear continuously in sumptuary laws throughout the century. However, the number of different silk fabrics increased over time and thus also their availability for less affluent people, blurring boundaries yet again. Sumptuary laws described the ideal of a social hierarchy. But Pajur's survey of the laws reveals multiple ways of categorising people and points to an increasingly complex urban society. The translation of social distinction into clothing showed a layered interplay of different materials, quality, accessories, and types of garments, further complicated by place and occasion including different rules for church, weddings, and funerals. Pajur makes the important point that this complex system required a high level of "dress competence" on the part of consumers, which meant, in turn, that the law was never solely a top-down

3. Similarly, Rublack & Riello view sumptuary laws as "fluid and responsive to societal concerns", see Giorgio Riello & Ulinka Rublack (eds.), *The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective, c. 1200–1800* (Cambridge 2019) esp. p. 33.

affair but relied on the active cooperation of the people it sought to regulate.[4] Economic interests played a role as well and a mercantilist focus on the balance of the state's finances surfaces with the preference for domestically produced fabrics. However, this had a contradictory character in Tallinn, as domestic cloth production was small, and the town relied heavily on imports. Only the poorest artisans and servants were required to wear locally produced woollens.

Interestingly, in the 1690s the elaborate linkage between clothes and the corporate system seems to have broken down, for reasons that are still unclear. Sumptuary regulations from this later period disregarded classification by guild entirely – even though the guild system continued to exist. Thus, in 1706, instead of outright banning certain kinds of clothes for particular guild-members or their wives, the town council allowed "follies and fantastic ideas" in dress, provided that the wearer paid a fine. Of course, moral question about luxury and female honour and propriety remained, but now, the concern was focused exclusively on servants.

All this begs the question whether and how far any of the legislation was enforced. One way of testing this is to compare the normative evidence with everyday clothing practices and especially the social judgements and conflicts that arose from them. Pajur draws on a wealth of case studies, many of them from court cases, to examine the practice of mutual observation, or how people described dress, commented on others' garments, colours, quality and condition, and mused on their likely occupation and source of income. People did this both in relation to their own social standing and that of others: apparently social legibility was not just an ideal among elite town councillors. This raises the further question of how negotiable social boundaries were, and who the main objects of scrutiny were. One might assume that it was mainly people lower on the social scale who were affected by sumptuary laws; however, it is striking that councillors' and merchants' wives were frequently targeted by their husbands' political rivals for breaches of the sumptuary rules. From such corporate conflicts Pajur deduces that social order could be quite politicized; it was also a constant renegotiation of social status and a defence of guild, and sometimes artisanal, honour. But what was most heavily debated was the relation between people. Wealth proximity evidently posed a threat to the bordering group and this could be visible in women's as well as men's attire. Pajur concludes from this that sumptuary laws were only a momentary attempt to consolidate a "social order in flux".

Probate inventories are another way to test whether normative assumptions about dress really matched daily practice, and Pajur assembles a sample

4. Pajur (2020) p. 93, in reference to Susan J. Vincent, *Dressing the Elite: Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford 2003).

of 105 lists to examine the composition of people's wardrobes, changes over time, and how these lists compare to the legal requirements of the sumptuary laws. This analysis is complicated by the inventorying process itself where garments were not always ascribed to their male or female wearer: in many cases groups of garments were listed, and no prices given. Nevertheless, what inventories do show is that costly goods were very widely distributed across all occupational groups. Take for example fur. Whole furs or fur trimmings were not only warm, climate must have been a vital factor here, but it had considerable financial value. And indeed, fur was owned by all social groups and even sable – traditionally associated with the nobility – transgressed social boundaries. It appears that only labourers did not own sable. Highly regulated fabrics such as silk show an even broader social distribution.

It is reasonably complicated to analyse change over time with inventories since they presuppose a time lag: Pajur points out that many garments were probably inherited and others bought or exchanged some time before their owner died; even in the latter case it is not clear whether they were bought new or second hand. Tracing changes in different silk fabrics, for example, yields results that are hard to interpret, and this proves even truer of wool. Looking at individual garments, however, proves more fruitful in this regard, with new garments coming in at particular points in time, and others becoming more numerous. Appearances did change gradually over time, but many different fabrics and styles were used in parallel over long periods. The case studies of individuals show this well; they are also very revealing in terms of how clothes and cloth were actually used. So for example, the inventory of Birgitta Falck (d. 1698), wife of a master butcher, showcases her personal strategies and resourcefulness, as well as the use of clothes as capital: she pawned items, presumably to smooth cash flows and at the same time was active as a money lender. Importantly, Pajur finds no correlation between sumptuary laws and clothing in inventories. Silk, for example, was found in 72 percent of all inventories, including in one of the labourer's lists, despite the fact that it was one of the most regulated of all fabrics. Probate Inventories do reveal another level of distinction, however: intra-group differences were more pronounced than the ones between social groups. In the end, questions of inheritance, acquisition, circumstance, desire, individual tastes, consumption strategies, whether or not an item could be pawned, and also financial means all played a role and created dynamic and frequently permeable boundaries between social groups.

The inventoried clothes are complemented with clothes as bequests in wills. Pajur's sample of 117 wills offers insight into distinct choices of bequests that also have ramifications for social relationships. In about half of the wills, clothes became part of the testator's complex preparations for

death. Pajur explores the different relationships clothing bequests could express and finds both complex parent-child relationships and attempts at the creation of memory using clothes. Clothes clearly formed an important part of the material provisions that parents and benefactors made for children. These arrangements also often came with conditions and clothing bequests could reward behaviour as well as punish failed expectations.[5] Wills could also adapt existing property laws and customs; they could confirm, or, in some cases undermine already insecure spousal entitlements, for example a spouse's ”right” (in practice mainly customary) to the personal belongings of the deceased, such as clothes. This could be especially important in cases, where the husband married into property, and could be emotionally resonant in ensuing conflictual situations, such as when a husband, while he was alive, failed to fulfil the expectation that he would provide his wife with clothes adequate to her social position. Wills thus could express marital affection by directing bequests of clothes and other valuable goods to the surviving spouse or ”withdraw” that affection by redirecting bequests to other family members. Bequests to non-kin shine a light on broader social networks as clothes' materiality reflected differences in social status. In some cases, as Pajur shows, testators weighed the appropriateness of bequests, keeping in mind their own and the recipient's social status. Clothes could create difference at the same time that they strengthened social bonds.

Was fungibility a common characteristic of clothes? Court records offer insight into clothes as ”facilitators of commercial exchange” and serve to test the thesis whether they were substitutes for money or contained more complex meanings. Pajur examines the different market activities and strategies of people when acquiring, exchanging, selling, or giving away clothes and probes Renata Ago's thesis that it was only once cash became more widespread that objects could store more sentimental values.[6] In contrast to Ago, Pajur finds that social meaning and financial value were not mutually exclusive. She does this mainly through an investigation of the use of clothes as wage payments, showing that wage payments and gift giving cannot always be distinguished.[7] Similarly complex meanings can be seen in the widespread use of clothes to secure loans, whether as pledges or collateral:

5. See for example Chris Woolgar, ”Southampton's People and Their Goods, 1200-1500”, paper given at the conference ”Objects and Possessions: Changing Goods in a Material World, 1200–1800” in Southampton, March 2017, where he stressed the social life of things that could broker or sustain relationships.

6. Renata Ago, ”Using Things as Money: An Example from Late Renaissance Rome”, in Laurence Fontaine (red.), *Alternative Exchanges: Second-hand Circulations from the Sixteenth Century to the Present* (New York 2008) p. 43–61.

7. Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison and Oxford 2000) esp. kap. 4 also makes this point.

scarcity of cash forced many people to pawn their belongings, especially clothes, which thus gained monetary value. But there were also occasions where clothes displayed other kinds of productive properties. One of them was in relation to theft. Theft of clothes – whether out of need, proximity, or desire – led to further illegal transactions and they in turn could create social networks. Similar to bequests, clothes acted here as social links. The intricate transactions that ensued between thieves, peddlers, servants, innkeepers, and others created an ”alternative social order” – albeit one the authorities were anxious to suppress.

Thus, clothing was a type of fungible wealth. This could be a monetary function: wages or payments, security on a loan, used as a pawn, or a means of survival in thefts. The intrinsic value of the fabric made clothing an important object of exchange especially for poorer people. Occupational and social relationships, for example between a master and an apprentice, or a servant, confirmed social hierarchy or subverted it – depending on the properties of the exchanged garment. As an ”alternative currency,” clothes could also transgress social differences. But clothing also retained additional meanings. Their recognisability meant that not everybody could wear them if doing so did not comport with their social status. Clothes' specific properties meant that they were not an ”anonymous” payment method. People on the margins were subject to observation and a high-status garment on the back of a low-status person created suspicion that it had been acquired in an unorthodox or illegal manner. Clothes always retained social meanings and never stopped creating identities and evoking emotions.

Pajur's study argues for a complex relationship between social order and clothes. Sartorial practices show that sumptuary laws had an effect even if they were applied in a very uneven fashion and differently at different times. People took part in the creation of social order and the ordering capacity of appearance was internalised. Moreover, ideas about the visual manifestation of order had an influence on people's lives even when they did not follow its dicta. One of the main outcomes of the thesis, therefore, is to challenge the idea of a durable system of social signs in the early modern period. The social order itself was not constant in seventeenth-century Tallinn but dynamic and involved the active participation of the people: it was not only a top-down affair. This called for dress competence and also led to re-negotiations both of social boundaries and of social meaning.

According to Pajur, all this challenges the notion of a ”modern” consumer revolution in seventeenth-century Tallinn. Clothes had multiple cultural and social meanings as well as economic and financial ones; they were not only bought but acquired in different ways and these were not always the result of choice. If for example clothes were acquired as part of one's wages,

or in a bequest from a deceased relative or former employer choice could be limited indeed. Still, this does not mean that desire for nice clothes and an interest in changing fashions played no role in seventeenth-century Tallinn – it is clear that they did. Though Tallinn experienced economic decline and stagnation in the seventeenth century, it was nevertheless a dynamic society and not so different from other European territories. This suggests the need to re-evaluate consumer practices or assumptions based solely on economic growth.[8]

This thesis offers a plethora of food for thought and triggers many questions that call for further research. Some of the questions remain understudied although they could have been answered by using the carefully reconstructed case studies in other ways and by taking the wider legal and economic context into account. For example, while Pajur describes the inheritance law and practice rooted in Lübeck town law, the nature of the marital property regime remains unclear. A clearer perspective on this might have explained some of the results regarding spousal wills and possessions. Moreover, wealth as a factor remains obscure here although it is surely a major consideration especially with regard to spending power and the affordability of garments. The widespread availability of silk garments, for example, could suggest that wealth transcended social groups, and this could qualify the importance ascribed to guilds and other occupational groups. This thesis is a wonderful contribution to the ”consumer revolution” debate, even though that is not Pajur's main target. In the final analysis, the thesis amply supports the view that neither material culture nor consumption can be separated from a dynamic and complex view of social structure.

8. A complementary example of consumer dynamism in a declining economy is Bruno Blonde & Ilja Van Damme, ”Retail Growth and Consumer Changes in a Declining Urban Economy: Antwerp (1650–1750)”, *Economic History Review* 63 (2010) p. 638–663.