

Saggi

The Silence of Garments *Modernity and the conquest of elegance*

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Abstracts

Diverse società hanno tradizionalmente espresso il concetto di *status* in modi diversi. Le società moderne e capitaliste lo esprimono attraverso le regole dell'eleganza. Basata sui concetti di sottrazione e minimalismo, l'eleganza è il crocevia di svariate altre istanze: classe, genere sessuale, morale e gusto. Come verrà spiegato in questo saggio, l'emergere dell'eleganza nelle società moderne ricalca per molti versi le stesse attitudini morali che hanno generato il capitalismo. A questo proposito, il saggio si appoggerà al lavoro di Max Weber sull'origine del capitalismo, ma aggiungerà a questo alcuni capisaldi della teoria della moda scritti nel XX Secolo, allo scopo non solo di ripercorrere l'origine dell'eleganza e le regole che la determinano, ma anche di spiegare le funzioni che essa soddisfa. L'eleganza va a soddisfare le istanze contraddittorie delle società moderne che da un lato necessitano di esprimere lo status in maniera riconoscibile, ma dall'altro devono rifuggire dagli eccessi del lusso, alla continua ricerca di quello che viene definito "buon gusto".

Different societies have traditionally conveyed *status* in different ways. Elegance is one of the examples through which modern and capitalistic societies express it. Based on subtraction and understatement, the practice of elegance is at the cross road between several aspects: class, gender, morality and taste. As this essay will explain, the emergence of elegance during Modernity is to be found in the very same elements and moral attitudes that generated capitalism. For this reason, this essay will delve into the analysis of the emergence of capitalism provided by Max Weber which will be considered against some of the most influential works written about fashion during the 20th Century, aiming not only to define the rules of elegance and its origins, but also its functions. Elegance is the favoured child of modern capitalism as it fulfils its contradictory needs of display and understatement.

Keywords

Elegance – Capitalism – Status – Modernity – Understatement – Class

I. Introduction

Elegance, as we understand it today, did not always exist and, as this essay aims to show, it can be understood as the the ultimate way through which a bourgeois capitalistic society demonstrates its status. As a modern practice, elegance is very far from the flamboyancies of the aristocratic courts of pre-modern societies, and rests upon an inherent contradiction: on the one hand it is an affirmation of status, on the other, it does so silently, by pursuing a subtraction of display. Elegance, as it will be argued, initially stemmed from a puritan morality in a way that echoes the rise of Capitalism in Western countries as analysed by Max Weber. In fact, it can be defined as one of the instruments that puritanism before and subsequently capitalism have used in order to convey the modern concept of *Status*, in contrast with the pre-modern idea which was based on conspicuous displays of wealth.

For these reasons it will be argued that elegance is more easily definable *in absentia*, in other words by mentioning what *it does not stand for*. Elegance is ultimately the product of an absence: the absence of vulgarity. Under this light are to be seen brands that are commonly associated with elegance, such as Giorgio Armani, Bottega Veneta, Hermès, Chanel and some of the minimalistic collections by Miuccia Prada.

Within Fashion Studies, fashion and luxury consumption have traditionally been interpreted by employing the theories proposed by Simmel, Flügel and Veblen, however, this essay will try to read these studies against the grain and will to bring to

the fore Max Weber's pivotal work¹. This is not an attempt of dismissing the other scholars, but, on the contrary chases the goal of building a more complete and elaborated theory of luxury and elegance, looking at its contradictory and multifaceted nature. The aim is to demonstrate how Weber's ideas can in fact be essential tools in revealing the birth, the essence, and – to use his own words – the “spirit” of elegance itself.

In the following pages, elegance will be understood by treading at least two distinct trajectories: the gender one, as it coincides with a steady and slow re-negotiation of feminine codes by borrowing some stylistic ideas from menswear; and the class trajectory, as it is a typically modern way of conveying status. Albeit different, these two paths operate together and often intertwine, as class and gender rules in western societies tend to go hand in hand.

In order to highlight the complex and at times contradictory nature of this phenomenon, the more traditional studies by Simmel, Veblen and Flügel will be compared with the already mentioned Max Weber, but also with literary works by Marcel Proust and Edith Wharton. The reason for this is that, despite these novelists where painstakingly describing the customs of the upper classes at about the same time as Simmel, Veblen and Flügel, their descriptions seem to differ. In their view particular attention seems to be given to understatement, renunciation and elegance, as opposed to lavish consumption.

¹ M. WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism and other Writings*, Penguin Classics, London 2020.

II. Class and Display

During the Middle Ages and up until the end of the XVIII Century the display of status was operated by the upper classes through conspicuous displays of jewellery, lavish fabrics and precious dyes such as purple, and this regarded men as well women². There is solid historical evidence of this obsession with a hierarchically organised display of status because of the hundreds of laws and sanctions that were created in Europe from the XIII to the XVIII Century that go under the name of *Sumptuary Laws*. Such regulations were extremely rigid and essentially prevented people belonging to lower classes (middle classes and bourgeoisie) from adopting certain insignias of luxury of the aristocracy, even when they could potentially afford them. As it often happens in these cases, what is forbidden by the law is an indicator of what a society regards as an object of desire, hence, the profligacy and severity of these laws can be seen a clear sign of the desire that the lower classes had to imitate the styles of the upper classes. This, however, was perceived by the morality of the time as a potential disruption of the social order defined by God³. Indulging in luxurious displays was then at the same time desirable and sanctionable. The reasons for the introduction of sumptuary laws were at least two: on the one hand it was a way of preserving the *status quo* and the rigid division of society into classes, on the other, it was a profitable business for the state and local governments⁴. In most Italian City-states of

² Cfr. M.G. MUZZARELLI, *Le regole del lusso, Apparenza e vita quotidiana dal Medioevo all'Età moderna*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2020.

³ J. ENTWISTLE, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory*. Polity, Cambridge 2000.

⁴ MUZZARELLI, *Le regole del lusso*, 10, 37.

the Middle Ages, for instance, this was a widely accepted idea, so much so that it was a common practice for the middle classes to consider the price of the fines to pay as part of the final cost of lavish robes whenever commissioning one to a tailor⁵. From the XVIII Century onwards, however, this close association of lavish displays with status started to subside and a new system of values emerged.

In his studies on dandyism and fashion, Roland Barthes⁶ discusses how western societies, following the French Revolution, have adopted a new way of conceiving menswear. For Barthes, the suits adopted by men were the evolution of the Quaker's way of dressing⁷, however, he also points out that the adoption of such a style came to embody a radically new social organisation. The masculine outfit stopped being the vessel of the aristocratic proclivity towards appearances and display, and with its newly conquered understatement, begun to signify a new work's ethic, brotherhood and equality amongst men, and democracy; in other words, the values of the bourgeoisie. It still embodied social differences, as the equality and brotherhood remained a privilege of the bourgeois (the working class carried on being very recognisable), but the ruling classes were now citizens who worked, not aristocrats supposedly chosen by God. For Barthes it is this reduction of the male dress to an understated uniform, virtually similar for all men, that emphasised the attention to the detail. Given that men had to adopt similar suits, some of them started to seek what Barthes calls "distinction", in other words differentiations from their peers. According to

⁵ Ivi, 59.

⁶ R. BARTHES, *The Language of Fashion*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2018.

⁷ Ivi, 67.

the French intellectual, elevating such attention to the details of the outfit into a cult was the very essence of the dandy. The dandy is not a fashion lover, in fact, according to Barthes, he is horrified by the compulsion towards newness and imitation that characterises fashion consumption. These characteristics became prominent in menswear during the XIX Century, but it was with the XX Century, that such attention to detail extended to both genders, and as we will see, it today goes under the definition of “elegance”.

The Barthesian idea of the understated male suit as the signifier of the changing structures in power and society following the French Revolution, stems from the fascinating and influential studies of Flügel on the psychology of clothes⁸. The English psychologist proposed the idea that after the French revolution, in order to fulfil the new roles in public life men belonging to the bourgeoisie had to renounce fancy garments, silk stockings, powdered wigs and make up – all insignias of the *Ancien Régime* – in order to embrace simplicity, comfort and ultimately understatement. This, in Flügel’s words, is defined as the *Great Masculine Renunciation*. Men, says Flügel, «abandoned their claim to be considered beautiful. They henceforth aimed at being only useful»⁹. Following Flügel and Barthes, if men abdicated to fancy garments, the same cannot be said for women. This idea is also echoed by Veblen, who also suggests that the asymmetry between male understatement and female adornment were a requirement in capitalistic societies as the wife’s outfit was the frame where the household ought to show its wealth.

⁸ J.C. FLÜGEL, *The Psychology of Clothes*, Hogarth, London 1950.

⁹ Ivi, 111.

III. Gender and Class

As stated above, elegance can be conceived as a process of subtraction and understatement championed primarily by the modern and bourgeois upper-classes. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that before modernity the insignias of the upper classes were radically different, and so was the association between gender norms and social status.

In her *The Fashioned Body*, Joanne Entwistle points out how it is a peculiarity of our modern and contemporary societies – from the XIX Century onwards – that the clothes are the ultimate signifier of gender differences. This association is so pervasive that, even though women can wear trousers, in their symbolic representations they are usually associated with skirts, the gender signs on the doors of public lavatories are an example of this¹⁰. However, in the same study is also specified that in ancient and medieval cultures clothes were not so radically gendered. What they tended to unequivocally embody, on the contrary, was class. For the ancient Romans, for instance, wearing bifurcated garments as opposed to draped clothes, was not necessarily associated with a specific gender as much as it was the emblem of being a “barbarian”, hence uncivilised. Such association of garments with class rather than gender, carried on for several centuries, and it is with the already mentioned raise of the bourgeoisie after the French Revolution that the gender differences became rigid, not only in terms of silhouettes, but also in term adornments. Female garments became associated with fashion and tended to be lavish, whilst men’s became simple and unadorned, characterised by distinction and

¹⁰ ENTWISTLE, *The Fashioned Body*, 141.

in many ways akin to the concept of anti-fashion¹¹, as they tended to change at a much slower pace. However, the associations of clothes with gender can not be completely separated from their being the vessel of class and wealth. Here we find one fundamental implication for the idea that women's lavishness was a way of showing the wealth of the household. If this idea is true, then, it clarifies why these gender differences were much more pronounced amongst the upper and middle classes, whilst working class women, who needed to provide for the families as much as their husbands and who did not possess any wealth to display, were allowed to wear bifurcated garments¹².

The big divide in women's fashion coincided with the First World War. It is after 1914 that womenswear underwent some radical change towards understatement and functionality. With men at the front and women having to occupy more active spaces in society, the rigid victorian rules became unworkable and started to decline. It is during this period, for instance, that pockets appear in womenswear, the mourning rules stop being religiously followed and the hemlines rise above the ankle¹³. These changes will culminate in the radical re-organisation of women's fashion operated by Chanel in the 20s. From 1914 onwards womenswear in its more elegant forms has been in a relentless march towards the male suit and the concept of "distinction" described by Barthes, even if it needs to be specified that there have been important digressions, such as the return to a precious femininity proposed by Christian Dior in 1947.

¹¹ Cfr. T. POLHEMUS, *Fashion and Anti-fashion*, Lulu.com, Morrisville 2011.

¹² ENTWISTLE, *The Fashioned Body*, 166–167.

¹³ A. DE LA HAYE- V. MENDES, *Fashion Since 1900. World of Art*. Thames and Hudson, London 2010, 48–52.

Softening the gender rules in clothing usually entailed a re-negotiation of femininity rather than the opposite. The introduction of the “harem trousers” by Poiret, the Chanel suit, Yves Saint Laurent’s “*Le Smoking*”, Armani’s elegant *tailleurs* of the 1980s and even Calvin Klein’s attempts in proposing a unisex aesthetic during the 1990s are all examples of this. It is therefore unsurprising that certain rules and values typical of menswear, such as the penchant for understatement and distinction, have slowly but steadily crawled into womenswear. This constant transformation and hybridisation of female fashion is also a possible explanation of why ladies-wear has changed so radically throughout the decades, whilst the three-piece-suit traditionally worn by men, underwent very minimal changes. It can be argued that it is only since Alessandro Michele took over at Gucci that the opposite attempt, namely to propose more feminine garments for men in a commercially viable way, has been, to some extent, achieved. In his interesting comparison between the style of Chanel and Courrège published in 1967, Roland Barthes, suggests that whilst Courrège is youthful, fresh and changes fast – as fashion is expected to do – Chanel defies time, avoids the fickleness of fashion in the pursuit of a long-lasting style. In other words, while Courrège embodies *Fashion*, Chanel embodies *Chic*, and – carries on Barthes – is not by pure chance that Chanel’s suits are very similar to men’s suits. Like the outfit of the dandy, they also chase “distinction” through understatement and details¹⁴.

¹⁴ BARTHES, *The Language of Fashion*, 101.

IV. A Weberian Take

Whilst fashion studies have often relied on the work of thinkers such as Veblen¹⁵, Simmel¹⁶ and Flügel¹⁷, who analysed the dynamics and the reasons that pushed society to embrace conspicuous waste and conspicuous consumption, the work of Max Weber did not receive the same attention. There have been, however, some noble exceptions to this, one example being the recent work of Richard Thompson Ford¹⁸. In this work Weber explains how the origins of western capitalism are to be found in the very morality, ideas and theology promulgated by protestant theologians such as John Calvin. For Weber this constitutes the very origin of the “spirit of capitalism”, but does not necessarily mean that capitalism can now-a-days exist only in protestant societies. What his text demonstrates, however, is how the theological underpinnings laid by Calvin as well as other religious thinkers, have been conducive to the development of the capitalistic way of rationalised production. What is often not fully considered is how Weber suggests not only some ideas about production of goods and wealth, but also about how capitalistic societies tend to consume. In other words, reading Weber against the grain can reveal the direction of taste that characterises the west today.

¹⁵ Cfr. T. VEBLÉN, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1973.

¹⁶ G. SIMMEL, *Fashion*, reprinted in *Fashion Marketing: An Anthology of Viewpoints and Perspectives*, Allen and Unwin, London 1973.

¹⁷ J.C. FLÜGEL, *The Psychology of Clothes*, Hogarth Press, London 1950.

¹⁸ R. THOMPSON FORD, *Dress Codes: How the Laws of Fashion Made History*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2021.

Weber's starting point is that only in the west and in relatively recent times what we call capitalism has emerged. In fact it is important to clarify that capitalism, for Weber, does not simply refer to the accumulation of high amounts of capital, but refers to a specific and standardised way of achieving it. Capitalistic enterprises require at least two components: on the one hand producing and piling up wealth, on the other, saving as much as possible in order to re-invest the savings and increase the capital even more. Weber comes to the conclusion that these two requirements reflect the protestant understanding of the individual and his position in relation to God. Central to this theory is the idea of predestination which is typical of Protestantism but unknown, for instance, to the Catholics. According to some protestant churches, such as the Calvinist tradition, the salvation or damnation of the believer was decided by God ever since. Mankind is divided between reprobates and the small *invisible* Church of the elect¹⁹, however the elect can not be told apart from the reprobate by any member of the community, and trying to do so would be a presumptuous attempt to penetrate the mysteries of God. Being admitted into heaven for the protestant is not a matter of confession and atonement as it is for Catholics, but a more intimate and to some extent uncontrollable process. The fear of hell and the unfathomable wrath of God was so overwhelming for the protestants that the ascetic life and work ethic became the devise through which one could demonstrate to themselves that they belonged to the elect. According to Weber this is what has laid the foundations of the stern work ethics of capitalism which hinges upon generating money and re-investing it, rather than indulging in the sinful-

¹⁹ WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic*, 76.

ness of luxury. It is the precise duty of men to work endlessly and produce in order to leave the world a better place, and to do so, money is to be generated but not spent, and men need to embrace an ascetic life, akin to the lives of monks in monasteries characterised by work, prayer, meditation and *renunciation*. In his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim expands this concept of renunciation in relation to asceticism by explaining how it is common to most religions to encourage such practice which is to be considered a form of “negative cult”. This in the author’s view is a cult defined by what is avoided rather than by what is actively done by the believer²⁰. It can be said, that this idea of subtraction and negative cults is more common amongst protestants rather than the catholic believers, in fact, whilst the protestant ethics seems to hinge upon the asceticism of the believer, in the catholic church prominence is given to the corpus of rituals, what Durkheim in the same work calls the “positive cult”.

It has been often suggested that protestant communities give more focus to the individual and less to the community with very specific implications regarding the attitudes of the believer²¹. If puritan sects have emerged from Protestantism, it is precisely because the morality of the individual became more rigid and stern and the individual tended to feel a greater responsibility for his own actions. This could be due to the internalisation of certain institutions that in the Catholic Church are to be found outside the individual conscience. In Catholicism, for instance, repentance and atonement are not an individual mat-

²⁰ E. DURKHEIM, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, 221-243.

²¹ Cfr. WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic*, and also E. DURKHEIM, *On Suicide*, Penguin Classics, London 2006.

ter, but tend to be controlled by the Church in the person of the priest during the confession. The priest examines the sins and has the power to absolve them; no similar institution is present in Protestantism, hence the entire responsibility for sins resides within the individual conscience of the believer who is required to operate a rigid self-control. In other words, the protestant, deprived of the external institution of confession-forgiveness, needs to rely on himself and his own self-control, to prevent and avoid committing sins. The apparent freedom granted to the believer who has the possibility to provide a personal interpretation of the scriptures, seems in fact just an illusion: it is precisely because the controlling role operated by the church has been internalised that it became more demanding and severe, imbricated with the subject's own conscience.

The internalisation of certain rules within the individual's moral sense determined patterns of production and consumption which, as Weber said, were conducive to the emergence of modern capitalism and now the reasons appear clearer: it is a duty of a good protestant to demonstrate his own *state of grace* through hard work and renunciation, leaving the world a richer place. It is equally a duty of a good protestant not to waste resources and not to live in luxury. Weber points out how, for the Calvinist, the sanctification of life entails that every aspect of one's existence is consecrated and permeated by Christianity. This, obviously, meant that even the ways in which these early capitalists dressed was dominated by certain predicaments and followed specific rules. As it will be suggested, some of these rules are still detectable in our contemporary approach to fashion and dress, but it could also be argued that they are the very foundation of our contemporary concept of elegance.

According to Weber's text, for the Calvinists, the unnecessary displays of wealth—which were the norm for feudal catholic countries—were regarded as a *worship of the creature*²², and it is interesting to note how, to some protestant traditions there were limited instances in which indulging in luxury was considered morally acceptable. For the Quakers, for example, the only morally acceptable exception to the use of wealth is the one related to the concept of “comfort”²³.

As suggested above, the internalisation of a rule in one's own moral system can become far more effective than the system of laws imposed by the state. This could also partially explain why the rise of the bourgeoisie at the end of the XVIII Century coincided with a steady and progressive dismissal of sumptuary laws across Europe. The new taste adopted by the bourgeois implicitly discouraged conspicuous displays of wealth which were now morally sanctioned as vulgar. During the XVI-II Century the Sumptuary laws, once omnipresent, drifted out from Modern legislations as they became superfluous. It can be suggested that displays of luxury in such a society, pervaded by the stern values of a morally respectable bourgeoisie, started being associated with vulgarity rather than status.

V. Veblen v/s Weber

Central to Thorstein Veblen's idea is the fact that the so called “leisure class” demonstrates its status by indulging in grand displays of luxury and wealth. What he calls *conspicuous consumption* and which is always paired with its daunting twin *conspicuous*

²² WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic*, 24, 115.

²³ Ivi, 116.

waste. An interesting critique to Veblen has been formulated by Theodor Adorno. The German philosopher pointed out that Veblen, with his hatred for the upper classes and conspicuous consumption, expresses somewhat a moralistic, puritan point of view²⁴. If Adorno's critique to Veblen is correct, an ironic paradox emerges as Veblen's anti-capitalistic and moralistic disgust for *conspicuous consumption* would be similar to that of the puritan capitalists themselves as described in *The Protestant Ethics* by Weber. In fact, the views of Veblen and Weber regarding capitalism and consumption can be seen as diametrically opposed: for Veblen capitalism is about striving for luxury, whilst for Weber is only about making money but never really spending it as doing so could be morally reprehensible. This latest point constituted the ground for many critiques that throughout the decades have been moved to Weber's text. According to some of his most violent critics he only focused on the concept or "Work" and overlooked the idea of luxury and consumption²⁵. These themes, however have not been left unexplored. On the contrary, for Weber the renunciation to luxury and consumption were fundamental traits of the puritan asceticism which generated wealth and capital.

As also pointed out by Weber, the religious instances that generated capitalism and a certain moral rigidity have subsided in modern times. Society has been secularised, even though the traces of puritanism remained in our modern bourgeois social fabric. Furthermore, some of the habits that generate and increase the capital are adopted also by non-protestant societies.

²⁴ T. ADORNO, *Prisms*, MIT press, Cambridge-MA 1967, 76.

²⁵ WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic*, 244.

The same, of course happened with the rules of dress, fashion, and especially elegance.

In fact, it is possible to say that the worshiping of the rules of elegance is the very aspect that reconciles Veblen and Weber's views. It is undoubtedly true that even the most austere capitalists may indulge in some form of luxury consumption, and for this reason, elegance can be seen as the compromise between the two tendencies: it satisfies the need for consumption, while looking understated, hence, less morally sanctionable. What is being suggested here is that elegance satisfies a "need" of capitalistic societies rooted in a stern protestant morality which inevitably tends towards asceticism and renunciation. Elegance covers luxury with modesty, in this specific sense, elegance, like a neurotic symptom, is the appeasement and the sign of an unconscious struggle between two opposite tendencies. Elegance means consumption, and yet it also embodies an idea of renunciation to excessive displays of wealth, and for this reason it is often based on comfort and respectability. It can be expensive but it does not necessarily look so at a first glance as it is based on details and manufacture rather than embellishments.

VI. The Pursuit of Understatement As a Symbol of Status

One fundamental features of recent modernity is the turmoil in the social structure. The Victorian Society, for instance, as suggested by historians such as Judith Flanders, was hierarchical and yet it was porous; in other words, despite the rigid aristocratic *façade*, it was possible in the 19th Century to climb up the social ladder within a span of one or two generations as the so-

cial position was determined by money rather than birth²⁶. Central to this process, for the *nouveau riche*, was the acquisition of “taste”, and this usually entailed learning how to avoid massive, hence vulgar, displays of wealth. This is a characteristic that is also found in the very etymology of the word *elegance*, which in its very Latin origin – *eligo* – had the meaning of picking out, choosing, in other words being able to select. It is interesting to note how, despite influential commentators such as the already mentioned Veblen and Simmel at the turn of the Century were criticising the upper classes and their “conspicuous waste and conspicuous consumption”, some of the finest writers of fiction who painstakingly described the European and American Upper Classes were noticing precisely the opposite tendency, in other words, how lavish displays were drifting out of favour and were being replaced by understatement. Novelists such as Marcel Proust and Edith Wharton were in fact capturing the development of a taste based on simplicity rather than display. In the second volume of his *Recherche* initially published in 1919 –*In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*– Proust writes of a conversation between the young protagonist and his friend Albertine.

“Look at Mme. Elstir; there’s a well dressed woman if you like.” I answered that she had struck me as being dressed with the utmost simplicity. Albertine laughed. “She does put on the simplest things, I admit, but she dresses wonderfully, and to get what you call simplicity costs her a fortune.” Mme. Elstir’s gowns passed unnoticed by any one who had not a sober and

²⁶ J. FLANDERS, *The Victorian House*, HarperPerennial, New York 2004, 253.

unerring taste in matters of attire. This was lacking in me. Elstir possessed it in a supreme degree, or so Albertine told me²⁷.

During the conversation the boy is told that a woman is elegant when she devotes all her money and efforts to the achievement of simplicity of clothes rather than grand displays and this information is received by the adolescent boy, who is in the process of becoming a man, as a form of epiphany. The idea that Proust conveys is that the garments should be looked at twice before realising how precious their details are, and how sophisticated is their simplicity. Plainness in the book, is not seen as a starting point of an outfit but the most refined of all achievements for a lady. It is certainly interesting that this consideration is contained in a book that is often regarded as a monument to snobbery. This prominence of the detail in womenswear, echoes the description of dandyism provided by Barthes with one fundamental exception: if for Barthes this cult of simplicity, understatement and detail was a prerogative of menswear, by the turn of the Century it was also translating into womenswear. An even more emblematic example can be found in the work of Edith Wharton and her *The Age of Innocence* which was firstly published in 1920, one year after Proust's volume. Throughout her vast body of work, but specifically in this book, Wharton analyses her own social milieu —the American Upper Classes— with an ethnographical precision. The customs and inclinations of her world are described as “tribal rules” and the writer takes the place of an attentive social scientist. In several segments of the book the author talks about the importance of understatement

²⁷ M. PROUST, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, Global Grey, London 2019, 441-442.

ment. While describing Laurence Leffers, one of the characters, for instance, Wharton writes

One had only to look at him, from the slant of his bald forehead and the curve of his beautiful fair moustache to the long patent-leather feet at the other end of his lean and elegant person, to feel that the knowledge of “form” must be congenital in any one who knew how to wear such good clothes so carelessly and carry such height with so much lounging grace.²⁸

In other words, the ultimate quality of this character’s elegance is precisely his apparent “carelessness”, the fact that he seems not to be concerned about his appearance. Furthermore, the book adds a description of an engagement ring where this evolution of taste is rather explicit:

A large thick sapphire set in invisible claws, met with her unqualified admiration.

“It’s the new setting: of course it shows the stone beautifully, but it looks a little bare to old-fashioned eyes,” Mrs. Welland had explained.²⁹

“Old fashioned eyes” prefer lavishness and display, whilst the new fashion, the elegant fashion, is based upon subtraction and simplicity. However the most indicative part of the book for our purpose, occurs when the subject of a conversation amongst women becomes the extravagance in fashion

“The extravagance in dress—” Miss Jackson began.

“Ah, Jane Merry is one of us,” said Mrs. Archer sighing,

“Yes; she’s one of the few. In my youth,” Miss Jackson rejoined,

“it was considered vulgar to dress in the newest fashions; and Amy Sillerton has always told me that in Boston the rule was

²⁸ E. WHARTON, *The Age of Innocence*, Vintage Books, London 2008, 7-8.

²⁹ *Ivi*, 25.

to put away one's Paris dresses for two years. Old Mrs. Baxter Pennilow, who did everything handsomely, used to import twelve a year, two velvet, two satin, two silk, and the other six of poplin and the finest cashmere. It was a standing order, and as she was ill for two years before she died they found forty-eight Worth dresses that had never been taken out of tissue paper; and when the girls left off their mourning they were able to wear the first lot at the Symphony concerts without looking in advance of the fashion³⁰."

This rather descriptive and accurate piece seems to capture precisely the two characteristics that this essay is trying to analyse: on the one hand, the fact that the modern capitalist bourgeoisie *requires* to spend, on the other the fact that it *needs* to do so discretely and in a tempered way, according to the remains of the protestant legacy out of which —as suggested by Weber— it was born centuries before. Spending for clothes is at the same time a necessity and a sin, and understatement seems to provide the compromise, the gentle hypocrisy upon which the upper classes are rooted.

In Wharton and Proust's literary works there are several suggestions of how the "good taste" of the upper classes at the time was slowly but steadily going towards simplicity and understatement. Whilst Veblen's take on consumption seems to stem from a rigid old-fashioned morality and ultimately reflect only partially the upper classes' habits, these novelists provide a snapshot of a changing society. In fact, the late Victorian and Edwardian periods – where the system of fashion as we know it today was constituted – laid the foundations for the rules of

³⁰ Ivi, 219-220.

elegance that Parisian designers embraced especially from the 20s onwards, thanks to *Couturiers* like Gabrielle Chanel.

VII. The Conquest of Understatement

From the end on the Edwardian era to this day, womenswear in its most elegant form started a relentless march towards menswear, or at least towards the idea of renunciation and understatement that characterised menswear.

We discussed above the way in which womenswear started changing structurally from the First World War ahead, becoming increasingly softer and more comfortable. In 1926 Chanel invented the little black dress and throughout her career the Chanel jacket, inspired by military jackets, was introduced. From the 30s onwards it becomes increasingly more acceptable for women to wearing bifurcated garments and in the 60s YSL championed *Le Smoking*. When working women needed a “respectable” uniform, in the 80s it was Armani that provided it by adapting elements of menswear to womenswear and praising modesty over adornment.

This is not to say that all female fashion embraced understatement and renunciation, or masculine codes. On the contrary, there is plenty of evidence to claim that certain notable examples of female fashion throughout the XX Century have searched for adornment and a display of “maximalism”, even in recent times. It can be argued, however, that understatement and simplicity which started as masculine values, have expanded into womenswear in what we today call Elegance. Elegance is different from *chic* and *glamour*, precisely because it reflects a unisex system of values based on *subtraction*. This is the reason

why brands such as Hermès, Giorgio Armani, Max Mara, Jil Sander, and traditionally Bottega Veneta are commonly associated with this word. They can be extremely luxurious and expensive, and yet they eschew lavish displays and often need to be looked at twice before being fully appreciated. Some of these brands –Bottega Veneta is an example– avoid the use of visible logos, relying solely on the quality of the manufacture and using expensive manufacturing techniques such as the *Intrecciato*, in order to be valued and recognised by their clients. These brands base their products on the cult of the detail in a way that echoes what Roland Barthes suggested about dandyism.

It is possible to claim that the pursuit of elegance in womenswear should be seen as a specific form of *feminine renunciation* akin to the one brilliantly described by Flügel in relation to menswear. This idea has not been examined very extensively even though one can venture to claim that up until very recently every attempt of softening the borders between male and female garments in a commercially successful way, coincided with a masculinisation of womenswear. It can be also suggested that the masculinisation of ladies' garments regarded not only the basic structure of the outfits (the adoption of trousers and jackets, for instance), but also the philosophy and system of values against which the female garments were measured.

To conclude, echoing Weber, it can be said that elegance as understood today, is the grand child of the protestant ethic that provided the fertile soil for capitalism to emerge under the imperative that a respectable modern citizen *ought to produce money but not to spend it* in sinful and lavish consumption, even though consuming for understated and functional goods became somehow morally acceptable.

This article tried to demonstrate how class and gender rules in modern and western societies play a common game, and both of these systems of predicaments seem to be contained, or at least originated, by a larger and less tangible shell: the new religious ethic that characterised modernity in the west. In this sense, elegance seems indeed to be a successful marriage between ethics and aesthetics, even though these implications tend to be overlooked because the very nature of elegance is to disappear before our very eyes. The concept of elegance – very much like silence – is indeed a presence created by an absence, it is obtained by avoiding its opposite and once called too loud it cannot but vanish, because it only exists *in absentia*.

