

The Devil's Cloth: A History of Stripes

By Michel Pastoureau

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To stripe a surface serves to distinguish it, to point it out, to oppose it or associate it with another surface, and thus to classify it, to keep an eye on it, to verify it, even to censor it.

Throughout the ages, the stripe has made its mark in mysterious ways. From prisoners' uniforms to tailored suits, a street sign to a set of sheets, Pablo Picasso to Saint Joseph, stripes have always made a bold statement. But the boundary that separates the good stripe from the bad is often blurred. Why, for instance, were stripes associated with the devil during the Middle Ages? How did stripes come to symbolize freedom and unity after the American and French revolutions? When did the stripe become a standard in men's fashion? "In the stripe," writes author Michel Pastoureau, "there is something that resists enclosure within systems." So before putting on that necktie or waving your country's flag, look to *The Devil's Cloth* for a colorful history of the stripe in all its variety, controversy, and connotation.

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Editorial Review

Review
The New York Times Book Review Imaginative...this playful but learned book will doubtless have an influence.

Esquire An oddball and charming little biography of a very devious pattern.

The New York Times Reading about the epic implications of stripes...you feel like a child gleefully taking apart a toy, examining its small components one by one, then putting it back together.

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Chapter One: Order and Disorder of the Stripe

"Cet été, osez le chic des rayures" [This summer, dare to be stylish in stripes]. In this somewhat flashy slogan displayed widely on the walls of the Paris metro in an advertising campaign several months ago, all the words are important. But the one which, it seems to me, carries the most weight is the verb, *oser*, dare. To wear stripes, to present oneself dressed in striped clothing -- if we believe the slogan -- is neither neutral nor natural. To do so, you must display a certain audacity, overcome different ideas of propriety, not be afraid to show off. But the one who dares is rewarded: he attains *chic*, style, that is, the elegant distinction of individuals who are free, at ease, refined. As is so often the case in our times, when any social code is capable of reversing itself, when any code, to function properly, is even required to reverse itself, what originally constituted a handicap or a liability ends up becoming an asset.

For the historian, this is food for thought. There's a great temptation to pass over the centuries and establish a link between the supposed boldness of contemporary stripes and the frequent scandals they prompted throughout the Middle Ages. In the long run, the stripe problem certainly exists, and clothes provide the most visible medium for it.

In the medieval Western world, there are a great number of individuals -- real or imaginary -- whom society, literature, and iconography endow with striped clothing. In one way or another, they are all outcasts or reprobates, from the Jew and the heretic to the clown and the juggler, and including not only the leper, the hangman, and the prostitute but also the disloyal knight of the Round Table, the madman of the Book of Psalms, and the character of Judas. They all disturb or pervert the established order; they all have more or less to do with the devil. Nonetheless, if it isn't very difficult to draw up a list of all those transgressors in striped clothing, it is harder to understand why such garments were chosen to designate their negative status. All the more so because there's nothing circumstantial or esoteric in this practice. On the contrary, beginning from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, abundant documentation in all areas emphasizes the demeaning, pejorative, or clearly diabolic quality of striped dress.

Is this a cultural issue, the Christian Middle Ages having inherited earlier value systems and believing they found in the scriptures a justification for condemning striped clothes? Actually, among other moral or cultural prescriptions forbidding practices of mixing, the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus proclaims in verse 19: *Veste, quae ex duobus texta est, non indueris* [You will not wear upon yourself a garment that is made of two...]. Like the Septuagintal Greek translation, the Vulgate Latin text is not very explicit here. After *duobus*, we might expect a noun specifying the nature of what one is forbidden to combine with and on one's clothes. Are we to understand by this (as the word texta and many other passages in the Old Testament invite us to

do): "You will not wear upon yourself a garment made of two different kinds textiles," that is, woven from wool (animal) and linen (vegetable)?1 Or rather, are we to make the noun *coloribus* follow the adjective *duobus*, and understand it as "You will not wear upon yourself a garment made of two colors"? Modern translations of the Bible have retained the first solution, remaining faithful to the Hebrew text, but medieval exegetes and prelates have sometimes preferred the second and interpreted this as a ban on ornamentation and colors when it was only a question of fibers and cloth.

However, perhaps it isn't a matter (or only a matter) of a scriptural problem, but of a visual problem? People in the Middle Ages seemed to feel an aversion for all surface structures which, because they did not clearly distinguish the figure from the background, troubled the spectator's view. The medieval eye was particularly attentive to reading by levels. Any image, any surface appeared to be built of layers, that is, cut out like raised pastry. An image was created by superimposing successive levels, and, to read it well, it was necessary -- contrary to our modern habits -- to begin with the bottom level and, passing through all the intermediary layers, end with the top one. Now, with stripes, such a reading is no longer possible. There is not a level below and a level above, a background color and a figure color. One and only one bichrome level exists, divided into an even number of stripes of alternating colors. With the stripe -- as with the check, another pattern the medieval sensibility finds suspect -- the structure is the figure. Is that where the scandal originates?

This book hopes to answer these various questions. But, in attempting to do so, it will not confine itself to the medieval period or to clothing. On the contrary, extending the history of stripes and striped cloth up to the end of our twentieth century, it sets out to show how, without in any way renouncing earlier uses and codes, each period has produced new ones, thereby bringing about an ever wider diversification in the stripe's physical and symbolic universe. Thus the Renaissance and the romantic periods expanded the uses of "good" stripes (signs of celebrations, exoticism, or freedom) without eliminating the bad ones at all. And the contemporary period has very much made itself the receptacle of all these practices and all the earlier codes, since coexisting within it are stripes that remain diabolic (those by which prisoners in the death camps were ignominiously marked) or dangerous (those used for traffic signs and signals, for example), and others that, over time, have become hygienic (those on sheets and underwear), playful (those used for children's things), athletic (those used for leisure and sports clothes), or emblematic (those on uniforms, insignia, and flags).

The medieval stripe was the cause of disorder and transgression. The modern and contemporary stripe has progressively transformed into a tool for setting things in order. But if it organizes the world and society, the stripe itself seems to remain unwilling to serve any organization too rigorous or too limited. Not only can it function through any medium, but it can be its own medium and, in doing so, open out into the exponential and the imperceptible. All striped surfaces can thus constitute one of the lines in another, larger, striped surface, and so on. The semiology of the stripe is infinite.

That's why it is more to the social history than to the semiological stakes that the following chapters are devoted. The problem of the stripe does indeed lead to pondering the relationship between the visual and the social within a given society. Why, in the West, over the very long term, have the majority of social taxonomies expressed themselves most importantly through visual codes? Does the eye classify things better than the ear or the sense of touch? Is to see always to classify? That isn't the case either in every culture or in the animal world. Even so, why is the derogatory sign system, the one that draws attention to outcast individuals, dangerous places, or negative virtues, more heavily stressed (and thus more visible) than the status-enhancing sign system? Why is the historian more comfortable in the documentary terrain of the pejorative than of the laudatory?

Difficult and complex questions that can only be given brief answers. First, because this book intends to

remain brief. Second, because the stripe is such a dynamic surface structure that it can only be covered at a run. The stripe doesn't wait, doesn't stand still. It is in perpetual motion (that's why it has always fascinated artists: painters, photographers, filmmakers), animates all it touches, endlessly forges ahead, as though driven by the wind. In the Middle Ages, Fortune, who turns the wheel of destiny for man, often wears a striped robe. Today, on a playground, the schoolchildren in striped clothes always seem more active than the others. And in the area of sports, striped shoes run faster than single-colored ones. Thus a book devoted to stripes must show itself capable of haste and swiftness.

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