

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KBP-1

Mrs. Rottanburg's
Guesthouse
7 Summerfields
Mansion Road
Glenhazel, R.S.A.
September 29, 1981

Dress Codes

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

In New York City before I left, one of the most predominant clothing styles was very slim-fitting slacks, usually dark, accompanied by some form of stylishly scruffy T-shirt. This attire was seen as often on young women as young men. Pointed black shoes were apparently mandatory.

In Paris, where I stopped briefly on my way to South Africa, the fashion was similarly unappealing except for the predictable French inclination to modify their dress in favor of greater femininity or masculinity. Paris women wore high heels with everything, which was somewhat, but not a whole lot better than the "mean looking" footwear of their American counterparts. Men in the French capital sported comfortable looking loafers more often than sneakers, but this was probably only because they had been made aware by fashion-conscious French girls that basketball shoes worn off-court can make one look either comical or unmasculine. Looking silly for the sake of fashion has never stopped men and women from any culture from wearing what someone else said was the style. However, clothing for French men that does not spell macho in capital letters, disappears without a trace.

Thus, you can imagine my surprise and disappointment when upon arriving in Johannesburg—a cosmopolitan but nonetheless African city—I should find worn by the majority of people a mode of dress as unimaginatively conformist as any in the cities mentioned above.

For starters, the young man that comes to Mrs. Rottanburg's Guesthouse to clean each day, Andrias Buthelezi, was wearing a very loose-fitting blue jumpsuit and basketball sneakers the first day I met him. Very practical, I thought, and very much in line with the extremely popular jumpsuits I had seen in the windows of both Paris and New York shops, although olive drab is currently THE chic color there.

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However, the next day not only was Mr. Buthelezi wearing the same clothes again, but while on a short walk around the neighborhood and subsequent drive into the city center, I saw literally hundreds of men dressed in the exact same bright blue jumpsuit and sneakers as Mr. Buthelezi.

Startling, this conformity, I thought. I had been told the Africans enjoyed vivid colors, but I had never imagined there would be so many enjoying the same color at the same time. Yet, as if to assure my doubting eyes, when I went into an immense store called the Hypermarket, at every one of the seventy-five check-out counters, the woman at the register wore a bright blue coat, and the woman bagging the groceries wore a red coat and white maid's bonnet.

Then, after emerging from the store I was confronted with the sight of a group of perhaps a dozen men picking up trash in an open field. All but one of them were wearing bright orange overalls, and the one exception wore a knee-length white coat.

The footwear I saw being worn by all of these people ranged from the previously described as comical-looking sneakers, to slippers or well-worn casual shoes. In contrast to the obvious care and perhaps even pride these men and women appeared to take in their colored overgarments, their choice of shoes was an obvious concession to comfort over style.

When the word style came to mind once again, it suddenly dawned on me that this homogeneity of attire possibly had less to do with fashion than with conformity to some sort of dress code. In which case both the colors of the clothing and the concern the people had for their appearance made considerably more sense.

As I thought back to the men in the field, bending over and searching extensively for refuse, it became evident the bright orange coveralls are an excellent choice for helping them to avoid getting lost while working. Also, while not entirely practical, the white coat of the supervisor serves as both an unmistakable reminder of the cleanliness for which they strive, as well as a gentle, helpful reminder of for whom they toil.

I also came to realize that jumpsuits in blue are a very appropriate color for domestic and groundskeeping work. While the blue is clearly visible amidst the tans, browns and lush greens of the tidy little yards, inside the home it is a color that is both complimentary to most contemporary decors, and yet still distinctly proletarian. On the other hand, the blue, and red outfits of the women working in the Hypermarket contribute to the gay, and busy orderliness of that huge, impersonal store, as well as help clearly define the rank or responsibility level of each of the workers. Of course,

with there being an obvious hierarchy associated with the colors of dress, it makes sense that the clothing would be well cared for. Surely, no one would choose to forfeit any of the rights or privileges accorded to their color.

After several days I began to wonder seriously if I would ever see the people dressing in the styles other than those upon which their position in work depended. Fortunately, this question came to mind on a Thursday, when I was to be treated to the sight of another fashion phenomenon. It was not quite an apparel revolution, but certainly a step, or should I say shuffle, in that direction.

You see, Thursdays are Sheilas (no apostrophe) Day. The Sheilas are the girls and women who work for families as nannies, and their day is the afternoon they are given free to do their shopping and visiting. While in the process of visiting, or congregating with one another (something they seem to love—one need only look at the tremendous numbers of them at the bus stops), I had the chance to see a few of their particular variations on the so far rather uninspired basic working outfit. The few that I can remember clearly, consisted of broad dresses tucked in at the waist, with matching or complementarily colored aprons. Bonnets, turbans, and scarves worn about the head were also in abundance. The overall impression I received was that the clothing these women wore was of a generally higher quality and finer cut than the clothing of the other workers. Except for the pairs or occasional trio wearing identical outfits (which probably indicates employment in the same household), there was a considerable variety, and obviously financial allotments had been made by employers for the clothing of the women. Such provisions are quite sensible, because a brightly dressed, and therefore cheerful nanny is a well known must for the proper emotional and cultural development of children under her care.

Of course, there is a minority group here that wears an astonishing selection of the latest Paris and New York fashions, and what is more, at all times of the day. Yet, for all of their creativity in the selection of clothing, they too suffer from a form of hierarchical restriction. In this case though, it is in their choice of automobiles.

It appears that also for the sake of defining their position in relation to one another, they confine themselves to purchasing from one of the two more expensive German carmakers as a way of fulfilling the minimum requirements of THEIR dress code. The particular selection made from the limited number of models available here, is how rank within the code is established.

It is unfortunate that they are caught in a restrictiveness parallel to that of the majority; and I would pursue this issue further were it not for the fact that being a minority member myself—and while sympathetic—I quickly tire of the self created problems of minority groups that do not realize in their particular circumstances just how good they have it.

Several days later as I continued my search for evidence of cultural diversity through attire, while taking a walk around the neighborhood, I nearly bumped into two people whom I had difficulty recognizing. I had trouble identifying them (being able to identify people is terribly important here), because their clothing was different from what I had seen them wearing all week. The near collision occurred because it was nighttime.

It thus became known to me that in the evening is the only time one is likely to observe personal attire on those who by day are confined to what this observer would call a rather strict dress code. Therefore, I am forced to conclude that the entire situation is a pitiable shame, because as we are all quite aware, it is extremely difficult to distinguish colors--or car models--in the dark.

Sincerely,


Kendal B. Price

Received in Hanover 10/16/81