

## Thinking politics and fashion in 1960s Cuba: How not to judge a book by its cover

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**Abstract** This article presents fashion as a mechanism of domination and political legitimacy, focusing on Soviet-type state socialist regimes. In particular, it documents some dynamics shaping the politics of fashion in the socio-political context of 1960s Cuba arguing that the consolidation of a radically new political order in the country was based, in part, on the production of denotative logistics that associated clothes with political values. The article concludes that denotative logistics are activated as mechanisms of impersonal rule in periods of political transition or regime change, such as after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. In those moments, they articulate processes of social engineering oriented toward producing a new society and a new man.

**Keywords** Cuban 1960s · Cuban studies · Denotative meanings · Material culture studies · Sociology of fashion · State socialist regimes

In the last three decades, the academic literature concerned with explaining the ways in which material culture shapes social life has surged. Mainstream cultural sociology, however, has marginally incorporated material analyses, which are extremely rare in the smaller yet diverse group of academic works focusing on the impact of materiality on politics (Molnar 2013). Mainstream sociologists have actually paid too little attention to the ways in which artifacts, fashion, architecture, and physical spaces purport political discourses that support domination or resistance. With few exceptions (e.g., Carroll-Burke 2002; Latour 2005; Molnar 2005, 2013; Mukerji 1997, 2002, 2009, 2010, 2012), they have slightly studied, as well, the role that everyday material practices play in the consolidation or destabilization of mechanisms of power.

The lack of a sociological understanding of the politics of material culture is dire in the sphere of fashion, in spite of the soaring number of graduate programs, specialized

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journals, and book series lately dedicated to scrutinizing and theorizing this practice and its associated industry. The relationship between fashion and politics has yet to be explained (Küchler and Miller 2005). Apart from Gilles Lipovetsky's (1994) classical work on the politics of fashion in western democratic societies, the mechanisms through which politics and fashion influence each other continue to elude the discipline. As sociologists Diana Crane and Laura Bovone (2006) pointed out more than ten years ago, most of the research on the social impact of fashion is "done outside of sociology by researchers in other disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities" (p. 321). The shortage of sociological approaches has probably contributed to the fact that recent attempts to define, or at least think about, a sociology of fashion (Aspers and Godart 2013; Crane and Bovone 2006; Entwistle 2000) have failed to include a single empirical study on the relationship between fashion and power.

This article discusses some aspects of this relationship in state socialist regimes, focusing on the Cuban case. It analyzes, in particular, the Cuban regime's endorsement of denotative understandings of material culture (Buchli 1999) that linked, in a straightforward manner, fashion and politics. Examining the production of denotative logistics during periods of radical change, when the destruction of an old political order and the creation of a new one is at stake, this article points out the hybrid nature of the sartorial semiotics produced by revolutionary regimes after they seize power, discussing in detail the role that denotative understandings of fashion played in the consolidation of the Cuban postrevolutionary state.

Many works have, in the last 30 years, focused on the politics of material culture in state socialist regimes, with only a handful of them being attentive to fashion dynamics (e.g., Bartlett 2004, 2010; Medvedev 2008; Stitzel 2005). These works argue that fashion played a role legitimizing and contributing to the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. According to these authors, fashion articulated mechanisms of political socialization as well as resistance that eventually ran counter to the interests of the socialist state. However, these studies have failed to pay attention to the Cuban case, one of the few regimes of Soviet type that did not collapse after the disappearance of the Soviet Bloc. This article incorporates that country into the analyses of the politics of materiality in state socialist regimes, further contributing to explain the endurance of Cuban socialism after the fall of its European allies. Paying attention to one of the few countries of the former Soviet Bloc where socialism did not collapse when the Berlin Wall was knocked down in 1989 might contribute, as well, to the knowledge of the causes of the endurance, reform, and collapse of the regimes of state socialism in general.

In the discussion that follows, I adhere to sociologist Chandra Mukerji's definition of material culture as "all parts of nature that have been made meaningful within systems of cultural actions" (Mukerji 1994, p. 158), understanding that its meanings are produced by both social actors and institutions through daily practices and processes that are dynamic and tactical (Griffin 2002; McVeigh 2000). I therefore understand fashion as material culture, defined as "a visual and material system of symbols and meanings" (Lee Blaszczyk 2008, p. 3) associated with practices of dress and adornment that include the production, circulation, consumption, and transformation of clothing, footwear, and accessories. This definition conceives of fashion as "the systematic, normative reserve from which the individual draws their own clothing" (Barthes 2005, p. 8; also, Paulicelli 2004; Steele 1997a, b), not as the seasonal production of

novelty and change (Aspers and Godard 2013; Entwistle 2000; Lee Blaszczyk 2008; Tranberg Hansen 2004) as it is commonly understood. More in particular, in the context of this article I will refer to the sartorial system of symbols and meanings that shaped Cuba's "revolutionary" etiquette in opposition to the "bourgeois" forms of dress.

The discussion and claims made here are based on data obtained from both primary and secondary sources, including interviews, published memoirs and testimonies available online, and archives, such as the website *Cuba Material* and garments from the author's collection of socialist material culture and fashion.<sup>1</sup> Secondary data were obtained from social science and humanistic literature. The article is divided in two principal sections. The first part proposes a theoretical framework to understand the politics of fashion in state socialist regimes during periods of radical political change, while the second discusses these dynamics in the Cuban context, during the "formative moments of utopia" (Merkel 2008, p. 328) that followed the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. This period, which in Cuba extends from the victory of the Rebel Army on January 1, 1959, through the late 1960s, had a long-term impact on the social and political dynamics that later unfolded in the country. As cultural historian Ina Merkel (2008) has argued for Eastern Germany, many state policies and "expectations, demands, and perceptions of normality" (p. 328) that later unfolded in that country took shape in those early years. This makes the study of the politics of revolutionary fashion in Cuba necessary to further understandings of the Cuban experience, both during the Soviet era and in the present.

## Fashion and power: denotative logistics

In her study of the absolutist regime of King Louis XIV of France, Mukerji (2012, 2010) argues that, alongside the most traditional forms of domination or strategic power, the built environment exerts a form of power that, having a different nature, she calls *logistics*. When power is logistical, Mukerji claims, material regimes become mechanisms of impersonal rule. That is, they give shape to political forms of shared consciousness or *figured worlds of power*. Figured worlds are shaped, according to this author, by analogies and heuristics produced by the disposition and style of the material environment. These systems of signification based on material attributes and practices, in other words, this "political culture embedded in things" (Mukerji 2010, p. 406), is able to transform political subjectivities, shaping loyalties and subordinations. Still, they are perceived as "a reality that seems inevitable, natural, or true" (p. 404; also Mukerji 2012). Referring to this mechanism of power, sociologist Virag Molnar (2013) maintains that logistics "is as important and consequential as the much more widely documented representational power" (p. 12).

The literature on state socialist regimes abounds on empirical analyses of what anthropologist Krisztina Fehervary (2013) calls aesthetic regimes, a category defining "politically charged assemblages of material qualities that... [provoke] widely shared affective responses" (Fehervary 2013, p. 3; also, Fehervary 2009). Some of these studies discuss the politics of fashion in socialism (Bartlett 2004, 2010; Kiaer 2001;

<sup>1</sup> See, in <http://cubamaterial.com>, entries under the tag "fashion" and the categories Socialism and Revolution.

Medvedev 2008; Stitzel 2005), establishing that the regimes of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union “thrived for a monopoly over [fashion and] all its components: design, production, pricing, distribution, exportation, importation, meaning, and visual documentation” (Medvedev 2008, p. 252). In the most comprehensive of such studies, fashion historian Djurdja Bartlett (2010) outlines what, in her view, are the three principal sartorial narratives in the Soviet Bloc regimes: “utopian dress,” “socialist fashion,” and “everyday fashion.” The first two narratives correspond to ideological discourses produced by the state, which can also be understood as aesthetic regimes, while citizens produce the latter in the everyday. All three, however, fall short when it comes to explaining the mechanisms through which fashion becomes an instrument of power in the political realm. The historical continuity that, according to Bartlett (2010), characterizes these narratives, moreover, does not explain the concurrent production of utopian and socialist sartorial regimes in many periods, notably during the Bolshevik Cultural Revolution, as Bartlett herself points out. Nor does it explain the concomitant endorsement, at the time, of asceticism and functionalism, on the one hand, and elaborate fashion proposals based on nationalistic referents and rustic materials, on the other (see Bartlett 2010).

The semiotic model that anthropologist Victor Buchli developed to explain the politics of the material culture of domestic space and architecture in the Soviet Union could explain the contradictions mentioned and the political dynamics of the sartorial regimes that shaped some of the contexts of social life in state socialist societies. According to Buchli (1997, 1998, 1999), the Bolshevik and, to a certain extent, the post-Stalinist regimes endorsed denotative understandings of material culture that linked, quite directly and without the mediation of contextual elements, the attributes of the material world with political values. This straightforward association between material culture and politics allowed Bolshevik and post-Stalinist officials to convey a radical break with the past, sanctioning new “normative notions of good and bad taste” (Buchli 1999, p. 162) that juxtaposed the socialist and the bourgeois material regimes and their associated values (also Reid 2002, 1997a, 1997b). “When taste became rationalized and structured the material world denotatively,” Buchli (1999) asserts, “it could be marshaled against the old material world and direct an individual towards new rules and understandings to describe an entirely new order” (p. 174). Following this semiotic approach, the straightforward association that Bolsheviks endorsed between both rustic ornaments and modern functionalist forms on the one hand and socialist ideology on the other—or the concomitance of utopian and socialist sartorial narratives at some periods—would find an explanation in their role dismantling previous material regimes of opulence and luxury—either bourgeois or Stalinist.

Examined under Mukerji’s theory of figured worlds, denotative understandings of material culture can be viewed as mechanisms of impersonal rule or logistics produced to convey meanings of renovation and change. A review of the literature on socialist fashion evinces, moreover, that, in this sphere, like in domestic space, these regimes—specially during the Bolshevik and the post-Stalinist eras—endorsed a straightforward connection between clothes or styles and political views (see Arvatov and Kiaer 1997; Bartlett 2010; Fitzpatrick 1974; Kiaer 2001). During those periods, officials attached counterrevolutionary values to bourgeois fashion, and associated work clothes and constructivist sartorial designs with the proletariat as a class and socialism as ideology.

This dual logistics identified military boots and working clothes with the proletariat, and classic suits, ties, spectacles, and pince-nez with the prerevolutionary bourgeoisie.

Understanding these sartorial dynamics as mechanisms of impersonal rule based on denotative logistics contributes to explain the politics of material culture and fashion in state socialist regimes during periods of radical change. In those epochs, the emergence of radically new sartorial regimes contributes to empower and disempower elites; transform class relations; create a paternalistic, condescending relationship between those who determine the appropriate socialist forms and styles and the rest of society; favor the intervention of the state in the private sphere; and sanction the use of repression to punish violators (Fitzpatrick 1974; Gerchuk 2000; Molnar 2005; Reid 2002, 1997a, 1997b; Stitzel 2005). Understanding denotative sartorial dynamics as logistics, moreover, facilitates a view of socialist fashion as a phenomenon that, as Katalin Medvedev (2008) maintains, was “complex, dynamic, and context-specific” (p. 251). In the following section, these claims are evaluated in the specific context of the Cuban case.

## The Cuban 1960s

Not many works in the vast production that characterizes the field of Cuban studies have paid attention to the material bases of power in the postrevolutionary era—not even during the first decade of socialism in the country, a period otherwise profusely scrutinized, except for some analyses carried out by historians Lillian Guerra (2012 and Louis A. Pérez (1999)—see also Chase (2015) and Serra (2007). This section undertakes such a task in a more systematic way, focusing on the politics of fashion during the little more than a decade that preceded the institutionalization of socialism in the country, a period that extends from January 1, 1959, to the proclamation of a state socialist constitution in 1976. More in particular, the discussion that follows presents these dynamics as a mechanism of political legitimation of the Cuban revolutionary regime during its formative years.

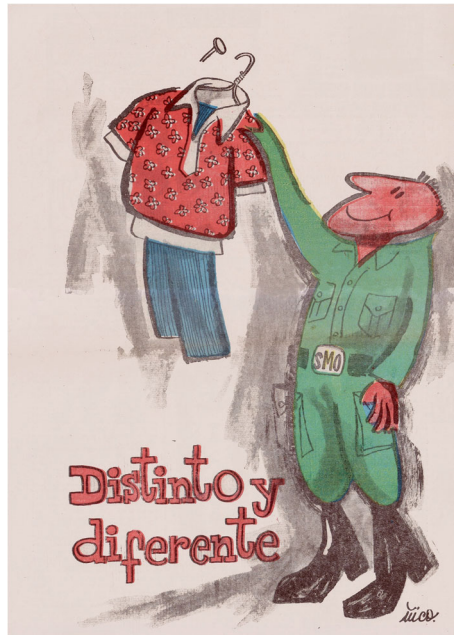
In the 1960s, three principal political discourses helped to legitimize the revolutionary regime: egalitarianism, nationalism and emancipation, and progress (Bobes 2007; Farber 2011; Guerra 2012; Pérez 1999; Pérez-Stable 1993; Rojas 2011, 2008, 1998). Sartorial dynamics not only visibilized and conveyed these notions, they also put forth denotative logistics that straightforwardly associated some styles and clothes with political values (Cabrera Arús 2015). Arguing that fashion has the capacity to shape and corrupt individual and collective subjectivities, Cuban revolutionary leaders, echoed by the media, endorsed denotative sartorial regimes that functioned as mechanisms of impersonal rule and social engineering, aimed to produce a “new man.”

Addressing the people of Santa Clara during the celebration of the fourth anniversary of the integrated youth movement, Castro (1964) elaborated on the capacity of clothes to transform values, a notion also represented in Fig. 1:

And surely that soldier, surely that youth . . . does not become a fashionista, does not become an Elvis Presley—how would you say it?—a “little Elvis.” [The transformation of] that young man begins when he cuts his hair short; when he is admitted into the military barracks he develops different manners, he develops a different demeanor, he develops a different character; he develops new habits, he

develops habits quite different from those habits that can be spotted on some street corners, that you can see in some parks: nonsense, senseless things, [sartorial] fantasies, all disappear from the mind of this young man, and he prepares his mind and strengthens himself against the influence of all extravagant and outlandish things. (Castro 1964; all translations from Spanish are by author)

On the occasion, Castro delved on the relationship between clothes and political attitudes, linking “revolutionary” virtues with olive-green fatigues, and contemporary styles of dress with “counterrevolution” and “deviancy.” Before, four days after the triumph of the Rebel Army, in march toward Havana in what was known as the Caravan of Victory, Castro had hinted the relevance he expected olive-green fatigue uniforms would have in the new society. Addressing the cheering crowd that received them in the province of Camagüey, he talked about the plans for demobilization of the Rebel Army and other revolutionary organizations, declaring that: “When normal conditions return, guns will be taken off the streets. For what and against what do people need guns? Rifles [will be] kept in barracks” (Castro 1959b). Yet if, in his view, guns were to be reserved only for the professional army, he expected that the guerrilla uniform be donned by all. “Olive green, of course!” he stressed, adding, in response to a comment voiced from the public related to the beards of the rebels: “What’s with the beard? [You say] that [soldiers] should shave their beards? Well, in that case, I would suggest that everyone should let his beard grow.”



**Fig. 1** “Distinct and different.” Sketch by Antonio Mariño Souto (Ñico) published in the weekly humoristic tabloid *Palante 24* (April 9, 1964) representing the transformation of a young man drafted by the mandatory military service after a simple change of clothes—from an eccentric civilian outfit to an olive-green military uniform. (Photo courtesy of Abel Sierra Madero; originally published in *Cuban Studies* 44 (2016), 318)



Indeed, after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, olive-green fatigue uniforms did actually displace formal suits and *guayabera* shirts—customarily associated with politicians and public figures in the prerevolutionary era—as element of distinction and political merit (Pérez 1999). The ensuing militarization of dress prompted a Soviet observer to compare, in an article published in the magazine *Mella* (1964), which catered to the youth, Cuban revolutionary fashion with the sartorial discourses of the Komsomolsks (Castellanos 2008). Other testimonies also attest that, in effect, during the 1960s “university professors and students [attended classes] wearing khaki clothes or with military uniforms and boots” (Pérez Cortés 2004, p. 47) and, as media scholar Yeidy M. Rivero (2015) notes, even TV stars, performers, and soap opera characters appeared on TV clad in olive-green fatigue uniforms to convey their support of the revolutionary transformations.<sup>2</sup>

If, in the officials' view, olive-green fatigues indicated people's allegiance to the revolutionary regime and its political ideology, not to wear them revealed bourgeois tendencies. Minister of Industries Ernesto Guevara (Che Guevara) introduced a subordinate to the Deputy Prime Minister of the Soviet Union Anastas Mikoyan, on the occasion of his visit to the country in 1960, as the “representative of the national bourgeoisie” (Borrego 2001, p.131). The reason was that the Cuban official attended the reception wearing a suit, unlike Guevara and the other cabinet members, all clad in fatigues.

The olive-green etiquette helped individuals to transform their political identities in accordance with the archetype of the guerrilla leaders and, quite particularly, Fidel Castro, giving shape to a figured world of power that extolled Castro's leadership and portrayed society as a *pueblo uniformado*, that is, in uniform (First Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba. Memoirs 1976, p. 29), under Castro's command. This sartorial logistics, moreover, fostered the radicalization of individuals in favor of the new regime, its institutions, and its values, as it gave origin to practices of socialization that often collided with customary practices of the prerevolutionary society or with the sartorial norms sanctioned by other institutions, such as the Church. The following testimony illustrates the estrangement from the Catholic Church a parishioner endured in the early 1960s when, compelled by the demands of postrevolutionary life, she went to mass clad in the militia uniform:

I went to Communion, as I usually did. I went, I confessed, I went to take Communion, and when the priest stopped in front of me to give me the Host he did not give it to me. I thought, well, maybe he made a mistake. That is what I thought, he skipped me and made a mistake, but he passed by me again [after giving the host to the whole line] and again he did not give it to me. The third time, I grabbed him by the arm, which is something you are not supposed to do because, you know, it is sacrilege to do that, to talk there, in front of the Host you can't do that. I stopped him and I told him: “Father, you did not give me the Host.” And he said: “No, you are in mortal sin.” And I said: “Me? Who confessed?” Actually, I didn't think anything of it, I just told him: “I confessed.” He said: “Yes, but [look at] what you are wearing.” And then I looked at myself, and that was when I erupted. I said to him: “What? Am I in mortal sin because of this [militia uniform]?” And that's when I smacked the ciborium and all the Hosts

<sup>2</sup> Ismael Sarmiento Ramírez, Facebook message to the author, February 16, 2016.

scattered; well, they rolled throughout the hall, with the ciborium on the floor. (Pilar Cabrera in Sejourmé and Coll 1980, p. 178)

Denotative sartorial logistics also helped individuals to communicate political allegiances through their clothes and sartorial performances. Castro's illegitimate daughter, Alina Fernández (1998), recalls in her memoirs that her mother, a former socialite, changed her skirts and pearls for "the blue-green uniform of the militias, with a Spanish beret like that of the *bodeguero*, the grocery-store owner" (p. 30). According to Fernández (1998), her mother wanted to convey her full transformation into a proletarian. Even women as influential as Celia Sánchez, Castro's personal assistant and close collaborator, found herself compelled to swap the fancy dresses she bought at the famous department store El Encanto upon arriving in Havana for the guerrilla uniform. According to Sánchez's biographer (Stout 2013), "by the end of 1959, it was clear [to her] that a certain kind of revolutionary etiquette had been established" (p. 343), and not even Sánchez dared to violate it. On occasion, these sartorial performances that also corporealized the state (Parkins 2002) were taken to extremes, as architect Mario Coyula (2007) attests. Describing the political commissar of the School of Architecture, Coyula portrays him as "a grotesque character . . . [who] walked around the CUJAE [campus] dressed up in an olive-green uniform and with a Makarov [revolver] in his belt, which he carried even though he had never been an insurrectionary" (pp. 11–12).

Individuals also communicated their political allegiances transforming their bodies or enduring strenuous physical tests, such as climbing Pico Turquino, Cuba's highest mountain, up to five consecutive times. Blisters, associated with working in the fields, also denoted virtues in the revolutionary figured world. Coyula (2007) observes that, for many people, "getting your hair cut, wearing gray khaki pants, and getting blisters from hoeing the fields" (p. 12) sufficed to turn people into exemplary revolutionaries. A female volunteer cane-cutter interviewed in 1970 by the official newspaper *Granma* declared that "a blister on the hand was more beautiful than a sapphire" (in Guerra 2012, p. 240).

To the archetypical "new man" (who also served as a model for the "new woman"), the polarized etiquette of the revolutionary figured world of power opposed the "worms," also identified by their clothes. A marked penchant for contemporary capitalist fashion fads characterized this group. In the officials' view, this trait exposed individuals to ideological contamination and corruption. Castro, echoed by the media, led this crusade, attributing contaminating effects on values to countercultural styles, and presenting these styles as vehicles of deviancy and counterrevolution. Only a few months after having seized power, on November 18, 1959, he compared the "little gangs of mama's boys that dress up" and the "groups of treacherous fashionistas in Cadillacs" (Castro 1959a) with rats that abandon a sinking boat, contrasting these individuals with the humble working-class Cubans. Two years later, during the March 13, 1963, speech in commemoration of the attack on the Presidential Palace organized by the anti-Batista Revolutionary Directorate, the leader of the Cuban Revolution called the middle-class teenagers who dressed up or wore skinny pants "specimens" and social "byproducts," directly associating their appearance with social deviancy.

That same year, *Mella* (issue 214, April 6) published a front-page feature called "What They Do and What They Believe in . . . A Little Gang of Elvispreslians,"



illustrated with photographs that showcased the style of the “deviant” youth (see Figure 2). In 1968, the official newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*—created after *Mella* stopped circulating—published a similar feature titled “Fourth World Boys,” explaining the logics that linked some clothes with “counterrevolutionary” values (in Veltfort 2008).<sup>3</sup> The 1964 article “The “Indolent” Disguise Themselves as “Invalids,”” also published in *Mella* (issue 293), illustrates in detail the straightforward connection that officials established between fashion and ideology:

Grouped into legions that walk through the capital, the deviants can be identified by their costume: . . . sunglasses, sandals, and side bangs.

Striped t-shirts and plus-sized shirts. Skinny pants. *Accatone* and Nero hairdos. Hair that is disheveled or dyed different colors. Miniskirts that show bare legs. Locketts on long necklaces. Thin sideburns. Books under the arm. Everything can be combined, according to the gender. It is not that the cowl always makes the monk, but those that are “sick,” unlike the young workers, the peasants, the soldiers, or the students, can always be identified by one thing: their extravagant clothes.<sup>4</sup> (In Castellanos 2008, p. 12)

Denotative sartorial logistics also surface in the comic strip “Life and Miracles of Florito Volandero,” published in *Mella* in 1965 (in Guerra 2012, pp. 150–151; also, in Veltfort 2007) (see Figure 3). This didactic cartoon illustrates the link between capitalist fashion fads and political values through the story of the ideological transformation of Florito, an effeminate young man that is politically “confused” and, unable to distinguish good from bad, throws himself into the arms of an American soldier looking for protection. Indicative of the direct association between clothes and values is that this graphic story not only conveys Florito’s “weakness”—his homosexuality—and associated political confusion through the character’s body language but also through his clothing. The boy, notably, wears sandals and tight pants.<sup>5</sup>

A particular case of association of certain styles of clothes with political deviancy is the blue jeans or *pitusa*, as this garment is called in Cuba.<sup>6</sup> Using a metonym—or symbolic substitution of a small part for the whole—, during the act commemorating the sixth anniversary of the attack on the Presidential Palace in 1963, Castro called *pitusas* the

<sup>3</sup> *Juventud Rebelde*, founded in 1965, is the national newspaper of the Cuban communist youth.

<sup>4</sup> People called “accatone” a hairstyle inspired in the Italian film *Accatone*, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini in 1961 (Castellanos 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Wilson (1985) observes that in nineteenth century England, sandals were also associated with homosexuality because the libertarian socialist, gay, and feminist advocate Edward Carpenter wore them as a symbol of political protest. Nineteenth century Cuban intellectual José de la Luz y Caballero also associated the exaggerated interest in the fashion typical of the *petimetre* (a tropical “dandy”) with a lack of “masculinity” and “confusion” in terms of sexual preferences (Goldgel 2013).

<sup>6</sup> *Pitusa* was a Cuban brand of denim pants that disappeared with the nationalizations of the 1960s, but the word continued to designate jean pants that, initially, were skinny, in the style of Elvis Presley, and later all blue jeans made with denim fabric. Historian Abel Sierra Madero (2016) claims that the name *pitusa* comes from the popular association between the brand “Pit” and USA, country where it was produced, but literary scholar María L. García Moreno (2014) suggests that the word might have come from *pituso(a)*, Spanish for “cute.” This “cute girl” etymology seems more related to the brand’s logo, which interviewees remember as a cowgirl throwing a rope in the air (María L. Pérez, communication to author, October 20, 2013, Weehawken, New Jersey).



**Fig. 2** “What They Do and What They Believe in ... A Little Gang of Elvispreslianos.” Editorial published on the cover of issue 214 (April 6, 1963) of *Mella's* weekly graphic supplement.

individuals who donned tight blue jeans. On the occasion, he associated *pitusas* with political deviancy and opposition to the regime, declaring that “the little lumpen, the lazy, the Elvispreslian, the pitusa” (Castro 1963) were similar manifestations of a counterrevolutionary ideology.

The media reproduced Castro’s metonym and the following issue of *Mella* (209, 1963) accused “Elvispreslians, challengers, pitusas, mama’s boys, [and] the ‘liberated’” of being “depraved carriers of the decayed and stinking petit-bourgeois ideology” (in Castellanos 2008, p. 7). In 1964, a poem published in the humoristic tabloid *Palante* ridiculed these tight jeans, linking pitusas to anti-social behaviors (in Sierra Madero 2016). In 1968, a fake classified ad in the satirical publication *El Anti-lumpen* announced: “I am selling, donating, exchanging, swapping, or transferring super skinny pants, of the kind you have to sew shut after you put them on. It is a legitimate ‘Pitusa.’ I urgently want to get rid of them, just in case. Yoyito. You may reach me at the phone number 56096543” (in Veltfort 2010).

Finding justification in these logics, the state persecuted and punished individuals based on their clothes. In the documentary *Improper Conduct* (1984, directed by Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez Leal), interviewees describe the persecution that Cuban gays suffered, referring to the fact that police agents identified them by their clothes. In her personal blog, actress Yolanda Farr (N.d.) also recalls that, during the 1960s, not to be taken for a homosexual—and therefore a morally weak and potentially counterrevolutionary individual—entailed that a man’s pants’ legs had to be wide enough for an orange to roll through them, a method the police actually used to decide whom to pull from the street in their operatives. Lack of space for the orange or wearing men’s sandals would indicate homosexuality or counterrevolutionary views. Making fun of those who violated these rules, while also warning them to live with the consequences, a satirical text in *El Anti-Lumpen* (1968) advises:<sup>7</sup> “Don’t buy Yeyé sandals before seeing my collection. I sell them for practically nothing. I’d also like to

<sup>7</sup> This tabloid was announced as the first issue of a new, supposedly nationalized magazine that replaced a former tabloid called *El lumpen* (in Veltfort 2010), yet I have found no evidence of the original publication, assuming that, being a satire magazine, the whole story was a forgery.



**Fig. 3** Panel of the cartoon “Life and Miracles of Florito Volandero,” published in *Mella* (May 4, 1965). (Photo obtained from the blog *Cuba: El archivo de Connie* [Veltfort 2007] and reproduced with the consent of Anna Veltfort)

buy a pair of boots because I’m imagining the worst. Cundi, the magician. Ph. 568799” (in Veltfort 2010). In her blog, Yolanda Farr (N.d.) also tells of the arrest of her openly gay friend Sergio Salom, pulled from the street without a warrant and sent to the labor camps of the Military Units to Support Production (UMAP, by its Spanish acronym) just because he “looked” homosexual in his tight pants.<sup>8</sup> Archival images included in the documentary *Eliseo Alberto: In a corner of the soul* (2016, directed by Jorge Dalton) show the police beating longhaired teenagers and young men profiled by their clothes (Dalton 2016). The September 25, 1968, police operative in downtown Havana, known as the Night of the Long Scissors (see Castellanos 2008; Olivera 2013) is another well-documented evidence of systematic police repression of individuals based on their clothes.

Denotative logistics provided a “scientific” foundation for programs devised to transform sexual and political identities. Psychologists developed the notion of *afocancia* (loosely translated as eccentricity) to classify homosexuals based on their external appearances and clothes (Sierra Madero 2016). Measured in degrees and stages, *afocancia*—or pattern A, as therapists called it, subdividing it into groups A1, A2, A3 and A4—determined the kind of treatment prescribed to prisoners at the UMAP camps (Sierra Madero 2016). The centrality these state programs of social engineering—and, in general, denotative logistics—conferred to the modification of external appearances is clearly illustrated in Fig. 4. In this cartoon, published in *Mella* in 1965, Pucho, a “revolutionary” dog who wears military boots and work clothes, paints with the color red a frightened young man who has long hair and wears

<sup>8</sup> Created in 1965 and active through 1968, the Cuban regime sent homosexuals and Jehovah’s Witnesses, among other outsiders to the UMAP camps, arguably to reeducate them through labor in the fields. Many prisoners committed suicide or died due to the horrendous conditions and punishments received. For a historical analysis of the UMAP, see Sierra Madero (2016) and Tahbaz (2013).

sandals and cuffed pants and is tied to an easel. With the color red representing communism, this cartoon not only encourages the magazine readership to profile individuals based on their clothes and accessories but also exhorts them to use physical violence to convert “deviants” into “revolutionaries.”

With the consolidation and further radicalization of the postrevolutionary regime throughout the 1960s (Guerra 2012), denotative logistics were at the core of other notions that also associated sartorial styles with political views, notably the concept of *diversionismo ideológico* or ideological diversionism. Initially formulated in 1968, ideological diversionism defined the expression of ideas or behaviors contrary to socialist principles, acquired through exposure to capitalist cultural products (Declaración del Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura 1971; also Díaz 2009; Guerra 2015; Molina 2009). According to this notion, the simple contact with foreign fashion—among other cultural products—could actually produce counterrevolutionary values. Accordingly, in 1971 Castro urged delegates to the First National Conference of Education and Culture to create policies to “neutralize and stop the penetration of fashion tendencies which originated in the developed capitalist world” to defend the “monolithic ideological unity” of the Cuban people and their cultural independence (in Molina 2009, p. 125). The following year, during the celebration of the eleventh anniversary of the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (MININT, by its Spanish acronym), Raúl Castro (1972) explained:

In recent months, the enemy has resorted to sending a large number of publications from capitalist countries . . . characterized by containing articles about the lives of young people in capitalist countries; photos of artists, news, fashion, film, art, music; introducing defeatist conceptions about life, work, study, and love of the homeland; characteristic of a youth without a future, without a mission in their society. (P. 10)

These cultural products, Raúl Castro (1972) argued, damaged the formation of a proper revolutionary morality. To convey this idea in more “objective” and, arguably, “scientific” terms, in 1974 the MININT inaugurated an exhibition on ideological diversionism (Díaz 2009). Among the artifacts and mass consumer goods showcased as sources of ideological “contamination,” curators included necklaces and capitalist consumer propaganda (Díaz 2009). The accusation of ideological diversionism came with serious consequences, affecting all aspects of life and family relations, both inside and outside the country, as the following testimony of a Cuban exile illustrates:

There was basically no communication between my cousin, a university professor, and us . . . for over twenty years. When I went back to Cuba [in 1979], he opened up a closet filled with the packages my mother had sent with clothing . . . for the family [during the 1960s and early 1970s]. He said, “please tell her . . . not to send any more of these clothes, because we don’t want them and we can’t wear them.” As a university professor, he couldn’t wear any of the clothing because it



**Fig. 4** Panel of the cartoon “Pucho,” published in *Mella* (October 4, 1965). (Photo obtained from the blog *El archivo de Connie* [Veltfort 2007a] and reproduced with the consent of Anna Veltfort)

would arouse suspicion and could get him in trouble as evidence of having contact with his family abroad. (In Barberia 2002, p. 6)<sup>9</sup>

In her discussion of the process that led to the expulsion of North American social scientist Oscar Lewis and his wife from the country in 1971, Guerra (2015) notes that the Cuban researchers who worked with Lewis between 1969 and 1971, trained to spy for the government, were taught to assess the political views of their informants by inquiring whether they dressed in miniskirts or tight pants.<sup>10</sup> Published testimonies indicate that citizens internalized this logic, not only transforming their wardrobes and appearances to accommodate the revolutionary etiquette but also learning to identify deviancy with specific clothes. North American journalist José Yglesias (1968) comments that one of his informants, a young man from a small country town in Cuba’s easternmost province, expressed concern that Yglesias might be “incubating” *la enfermedad* or “illness” of homosexuality after he saw the reporter wearing thong sandals. The young man told Yglesias (1968) that “the most common symptom of *la enfermedad* is a penchant for tight pants; [yet] any of the clothes young men wear in Europe and the States, in fact, would qualify as *tremenda enfermedad*. ‘If you dress well—that is enough’” (p. 203).<sup>11</sup> The young man also explained how the process of “contagion” and “incubation” of “the illness” occurred, attesting to the fact that people not only recognized and classified each other’s political views through clothes but also came to believe that fashion was actually able to “produce” ideology and make people “revolutionary” or “deviant:”

The first stage of the illness is nonpolitical: the young man is mainly seized with longing for stylish things, most of which are unobtainable, and he spends most of his time trying to get them or talking about them. . . . They are restless and unhappy that they cannot get such clothes and angry about the revolutionaries

<sup>9</sup> Communist Party members were not allowed to have contact with émigré relatives.

<sup>10</sup> Oscar Lewis was conducting research on the transformations to the culture of poverty after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, authorized by the Cuban government.

<sup>11</sup> “*La enfermedad*” means, in Spanish, “the illness” and “*tremenda enfermedad*,” “a severe illness.”



who frown on them. In the last stage of the illness, they are counterrevolutionaries; they despise everything about the Revolution and are only waiting to reach that magical age of twenty-seven when they can apply to leave the country. (Yglesias 1968, p. 204)

As this and others testimonies suggest, denotative logistics not only structured the revolutionary figured world of power, associating clothes and styles with political values. They also informed disciplinary mechanisms aimed at transforming transgressing bodies and minds. In doing so, denotative logistics became an important instrument of social engineering (see Fernández 2000) that justified the state persecution and punishment of aesthetic, sartorial and, notably, sexual minorities. Transgressors were sent to prison and psychiatric institutions or exposed to public critique, ostracism, and physical aggressions, as the following excerpt, obtained from the thread “UMAP” in the forum *Secretos de Cuba*, illustrates:

My saddest memory is that time I saw a sort of mob of people that supported the government attacking two young men on the main street of my town. The two guys, who became victims, had long hair. Those in the “revolutionary” mob carried scissors in their hands and brutally cut their hair. While some people violently cut the boys’ hair, others kept the victims immobilized on the ground. Those poor boys were later seen—in front of all passers-by—with their clothes dirty and ragged, because of the struggle. Their hair was cut in uneven tatters. One of them cried.

This overview of the efforts of the Cuban state socialist regime to construct—and exclude—political subjectivities based on denotative sartorial logistics reveals a perspective of the Cuban 1960s that is far different from the frequently evoked utopian characterization of this period as one of cultural renovation. By the end of the decade, a new political rationality had emerged that attached values, in a straightforward manner, to bodies and clothes, making the latter an object of political and, thus, public concern.

Denotative logistics, however, also made possible the opportunistic forgery of political values through the inauthentic performance of a “revolutionary” identity, as is evident in some of the testimonies commented upon earlier (e.g., Coyula 2007). As José Yglesias (1968) discovered, wearing appropriate clothes did not necessarily imply that the official values had been assimilated. “You look close, though, and you will see that they [the police] wear their uniforms real tight” (Yglesias 1968, p. 203), his informant told him, adding: “But do not say it and do not say *La Enfermedad* in front of them—it is like criticizing them, you know what I mean. All the young people feel like me, José, they hate UMAP. They want to dress well” (Yglesias 1968, p. 203). As this excerpt confirms, denotative sartorial logistics also helped citizens to produce mechanisms of representation and mise-en-scène of the revolutionary ethos that did not necessarily entailed the internalization of state norms.

This analysis of sartorial dynamics in revolutionary and socialist Cuba reveals several similarities with Soviet and Eastern European fashion, notably the production of denotative logistics that associated clothes with ideology and justified the state censorship and persecution of individuals based on their sartorial styles. However, the Cuban case also comports differences. They include the secondary role played by



artists and intellectuals in the formulation of denotative sartorial logistics. State officials at the highest echelons of power, not intellectuals, defined and mainly promoted these mechanisms of impersonal rule. Certainly, intellectuals, the mass media, and mass organizations echoed and amplified denotative logistics, becoming determinant in their implementation (Cabrera Arús and Suquet forthcoming 2018); yet it was at the top hierarchy of the communist party and the state leadership where these mechanisms originated. The systematic and detailed way in which state authorities integrated denotative sartorial logistics into mechanisms of social engineering and control also probably places Cuba apart from its Eastern European allies, although this requires further study.

## Final remarks

This discussion of the politics of denotative sartorial logistics in Cuba during the period demarcated by the triumph of the revolution and the institutionalization of socialism in the country isolates only one of the multiple dynamics that linked fashion with political ideology and turned the former into an instrument of political legitimation and control. Sartorial mechanisms of impersonal rule based on connotative understandings of material culture were also politically significant during the period, articulating a heterogeneous—palimpsestic (Quiroga 2005)—figured world of power that accommodated, too, the sartorial practices and demands of citizens, professionals, and urban elites. Architects Joseph L. Scarpaci, Roberto Segre, and Mario Coyula (2002) recall that, on any regular morning in downtown Havana, it was typical to spot state employees boarding “buses and trucks at cosmopolitan La Rampa in the Vedado neighborhood, clad in a ‘rural’ uniform composed of gray khaki pants and shirts, black boots, and shapeless straw hats” (p. 151), in stark contrast with administrative workers and other Havana residents who continued dressing in more traditional ways. This article, moreover, offers a less-positive view of a decade of Cuban history often remembered as “prodigious,” not least by virtue of its visual vocabulary, establishing that, in the postrevolutionary figured world, fashion was an object of public concern and an instrument of domination and power.

In doing that, this article discusses the articulation of denotative sartorial logistics as mechanisms of impersonal rule. Taking clothes as a direct expression of citizens’ values, state socialist regimes manipulated fashion to convey their own ideology, create and dismantle political elites, persecute and discriminate against particular identities, and altogether visibilize or spectacularize (Díaz Infante 2012) politics during periods of regime change. Against the saying that claims that a book should not be judged by its cover, denotative sartorial logistics helped these regimes to configure a new figured world of power and new political subjectivities, actually judging citizens by their clothes.

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