

Mikael Alm, *Sartorial Practices and Social Order in Eighteenth-Century Sweden: Fashioning Difference* (New York & London: Routledge, 2022). 176 pp.

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Mikael Alm's book is a deep dive into the notions that characterised attitudes towards clothing in the late eighteenth century, a time when the established correlations between everyday dress and social order based on differentiation and regulations were challenged. Previous research on the period has shown a growing tension between a traditional, highly regulated worldview, where social position determined the individual's sartorial choices, and an emerging modern consumer culture where wealth, wider access to fashion items, and the desire for personal expression through dress became increasingly prominent. People of the time acknowledged the inefficiency of sumptuary legislation and called for new, more drastic measures to maintain visible hierarchies. In 1773, the Swedish Royal Patriotic Society announced a prize competition in which answers were sought as to what advantages and possible disadvantages the introduction of a national dress would entail for Sweden. The responses, essays by approximately 65 writers, constitute the main source for Alm's study. The essays illustrate widespread perceptions of how social order and sartorial practices were connected, and provide insight into a variety of individual imaginary worlds with personally coloured solutions to the clothing problem.

The study is organised around the themes identified in the sources, resulting in three rich empirical chapters where the essay writers' voices about social order, disorder in the sartorial world, and the importance of and means for maintaining visible differences in dress between groups in society are discussed in relation to each other and to current historical research. Although the source material is uniform, the content, which spans wide, sprawling fields, and presents contradictory, inconsistent arguments, requires deep insights into many aspects of the

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eighteenth-century world. Alm is an eminently suitable interpreter. The reasoning largely follows prevailing arguments from previous research on consumption culture and changed political, social, and economic conditions during the period, with Swedish conditions serving as a valuable example of a European development.

The chapter on social order, *The Nature of Order*, is Alm's home ground. Here, among other things, the concept of *social imaginaries* is used in a fruitful way, uncovering patterns in a complex world of thought where estates, corporate bodies, rank, class and gender were intertwined to create nuanced social hierarchies. Alm shows how the differences between people were explained and maintained. He argues that the division into four estates was only one of several contemporary sorting principles that formed a dynamic, complex weave, whose binding points were perceived as crucial for society's order and endurance.

A central issue in Alm's analysis is whether the writers were truly describing their lived reality or merely expressing wishes about how it should be. Most of the (mainly anonymous) writers came from a socially engaged and discussion-minded group of nobility, higher and lower civil servants, priests, and authors. Alm assumes that the visionary elements of the essays focused on common or personal interests of this group. The King is however surprisingly absent from Alm's analysis. In 1772, Gustav III had strengthened his power through a coup, and the Patriotic Society was placed under royal protection. The question of the prize competition showed that the notion of a national dress was close to Gustav III's heart. As most of the competing essays were in favour of a new dress, it is highly probable that the writers formulated solutions that they assumed the king wanted to hear. Many wanted the king's ear, and more than the prize medal was at stake. In 1778, only four years after the prize competition, the royal dress reform was a fact.

The next chapter, *Disorder in the Sartorial World*, focuses on the confusion in dress perceived by the writers, which required measures to be restored. Although new hierarchies such as rank and class broke through and gave additional dimensions to the society of estates, Alm shows that hierarchical thinking and strong and dividing lines between people were still understood to be a condition for social order. When detailed hierarchical views met a reality of social and economic mobility and a new lively consumer culture, order was easily disturbed. As in previous research on sumptuary laws, Alm identifies economic, social, national, and religious arguments in the contestants' presentation of both problems and proposed solutions. These themes also structure the chapter. Notions of, for example, mercantilist economic policy, the moral significance of the Fall, and the importance of maintaining easily recognizable visual and material differences between social groups are shown to have been deeply ingrained in people's consciousness and

taken for granted. The idea that the poor, especially women from lower social levels, sought to emulate their betters and thus drove consumption and fashion development is recurring, long before Thorstein Veblen's theoretical models of trickle-down. Here, Alm makes an important distinction between analytical and historical concepts and underlines the formative and performative qualities of dress. In the end, Alm manages to connect the divergent thought paths and finds a common denominator and explanation in the concept of human vanity.

The chapter *Ordering the Difference* focuses on how dress was used to visually manifest and maintain the correlation between social status and sartorial appearance. The writers' preoccupation with creating order in the smallest detail, mainly targeting people in the upper strata of society, is striking. The fact that dress and social order were so closely interdependent shows that clothes not only illustrated and reproduced a given order, but were also attributed formative qualities. Suggestions on how hierarchies could be best visualised in colours of dress, textile materials, cuts and ornaments guide the chapter's outline. The essay writers' way of defining garments and colours in fabrics as higher or lower in quality as well as encumbered with special connotations and status, is compared with examples of genre paintings by the Swedish artist Pehr Hilleström. The use of images as a historical source can be highly relevant in this visual context, but Alm's reader is unfortunately left without introduction to the methodological issues and the art historical context of Hilleström's oeuvre. When the images are used to illustrate and confirm the historical accuracy of the writers' descriptions, I find myself not quite convinced.

In the same chapter, Alm also brings up the writers' generalizing and derogatory opinions of the common people's dress. His conclusion that peasants were dressed solely in undyed, rough woollen homespun and the nobility only in silk is however a blunt analysis that researchers on folk dress would hardly recognise. Alm describes Swedish sartorial culture as a binary system with a fundamental difference between the fashionable dress of the higher estates and the plain attire of the common people—a difference between high and low which was also described by the writers of 1773. The sartorial confusion that upset contemporaries, Alm believes, was mainly found in the wardrobes of commoners, who were increasingly trying to dress according to fashion and sent mixed messages with, for example, simpler home-made fabrics cut and styled according to current fashion. On this latter I can agree, and the author has the best intentions, but the description lacks the nuanced and insightful analysis of the previous chapters. Could it be that the theme concerns specific Swedish conditions where the English research literature is of little help? The analysis would have benefited from clearer analytical concepts and a view of popular dress and fashion as two parallel, sometimes com-

municating, sartorial systems based on different views and material conditions, rather than strictly differentiating binaries between high and low. Deeper insight into the relationship between urban and rural culture would also have offered the author further possibilities for interpretation. Judging from their words, the writers of 1773—who themselves largely belonged to a group of non-noble persons of standing that was rising in the social hierarchy—seem to have had limited insights into nuances and differentiations of the dress worn by peasants. The cultural constructions that governed the perception of high and low in the wardrobes were formulated based on the perceptions of the higher estates. This confirms the strong hierarchical divisions in society that, among other things, lead to an ignorance of other groups' material culture. This being the case, Alm runs the risk here of reproducing historical prejudice rather than illuminating historical reality. In the world of the essay writers, it seems obvious that the Patriotic Society's question concerned fashionable dress. The dress of the broad masses was already regulated in the parishes.

When it comes to material realities, such as the eventual realisation of the national dress in 1778, the study lacks in accuracy. The so-called general dress (*allmänna dräkten*), developed for men from the wider urban public, also had its female counterpart. Although the national general dress for women was less popular and worn for a shorter period, it is nevertheless documented in extant garments in museum collections and in portraits. The differences between the variants of the court dress and the general dress created conflicts between different groups of women. The importance of women for the Gustavian dress reform is thus underestimated by the author. Alm also overlooks central aspects of the eighteenth-century Swedish textile and sartorial context and misses the opportunity to highlight other facets based on both what the writers address and what they omit. The Swedish silk industry, which reached its peak in the 1760s, is not acknowledged as part of the background for the national dress reform; neither is the assignment of the tailor's guild to stand as a guarantor for observance of all the detailed dress regulations considered. Another overlooked example is the relationship between health, climate, and dress that recent research has highlighted as an important part of early modern sartorial culture, and which was also a significant argument in the 1778 national dress reform.

The demarcation line between the writers' descriptions and a historical reality that is maintained in the first two chapters becomes somewhat blurred in the third. The concluding chapter, *Fashioning Difference*, compares the proposals from the writers of 1773 with the content of the actual implemented dress reform. The comparison has its points, but the essay writers' social imaginaries are mixed with the reality of the reform, where the latter appears as a kind of answer. The writers'

ideas are contextualised primarily through reference to the turbulent contemporary conditions and looming transformations of the revolutionary period, with the help of research that emphasises the complexity of the period. However, for me the conclusion that the different notions underpinning the Swedish eighteenth-century sumptuary legislation went so deeply in people's minds is also a result worth underlining. An additional tracing backwards could have illustrated the long continuity of the essay writers' thinking more clearly.

These missteps notwithstanding, Alm has written a readable and insightful book with a given place on the reference shelf for historians with an interest in early modern social order, as well as for dress and fashion historians. It is a solid addition to the group of surveys that discuss early modern dress, though without deeper reflection on its actual materiality. By structuring and analysing the sources' contradictory, inconsistent arguments, Alm has made an important contribution to the understanding of the perceptions of social order and the importance of its sartorial visualisation and materialisation.