

Clothing is integral to exploring the historical landscape; it is clothing that gifts us identity as individuals. Whether it be nose piercings, printed t-shirts or pin badges, these seemingly trivial choices help convey our identity. But the evolution of fashion demonstrates something deeper than a picture book: we see the social limitations blighting individuals, their political views and economic status, via choice of clothing if they have a choice, or the uniform of submission if they do not¹. Given the world is not, and never has been, teeming with nudists, clothes and fashion are of immense use to the Historian. The hat, a convention established as political dress from classical times², exemplifies this utility. Hats are frequently larger political and cultural emblems, used throughout history to convey social identity and political ideology. From the slavery of Ancient Rome³, to Fascism in the 21st century⁴, the 'fashion' of wearing politics on your head has been embedded in societies for millenia.

In ancient epochs, the choice of headgear was as potent a weapon as it is today. A hat could rapidly identify an individual; the choice of hat informed the class, gender, ethnicity, religious belief, status and trade of the person wearing it⁵. One could distinguish between a farmer and craftsman merely from observing their heads. The 'pileus' hat was perhaps the initial use of the hat as political and social artillery. It was a brimless, conical, felt hat (often red in colour) and was principally utilised to identify foreigners in ancient times: the Trojan Aeneas is often depicted sporting the hat⁶. However the 'pileus' acquired its fame predominantly through the cult of Mithra. The cap was part of the iconic clothing the deity Mithra donned, an Indo-Iranian god popular in early centuries. The cult amassed a considerable following and was initially popular among the lower strata of society: slaves, '*libertini*' (freedmen) and Roman soldiers. Yet, as time progressed, the religion, and thus the hat, began to infiltrate upper ranks of Roman society: Equestrians, Senators and even the Emperor himself acknowledged the religion, and the 'pileus' became a more frequent sight.⁷ That said, women were excluded from the practising of Mithraism, and thus were limited in their expression with headgear. Whilst in periods of mourning Roman Women wore a headscarf - a '*ricinium*'⁸ - this was an emotional proclamation and a matter of convention rather than a conscious choice. This reflects the political power women held in Rome - very little⁹. Owing to their political insignificance, their choice of headgear had no need to reflect a political belief, unlike the headgear of Roman men.

The use of a hat as a social tool was further radicalised by the use of the 'pileus' in manumission ceremonies - when a master granted his slave '*liberta*' from their duties. The slave's head was shaved and a red pileus placed upon it.¹⁰ The change in hat denotes their change in status: from property, to Roman citizen. Hence, the red 'pileus' became a collective emblem of liberty. Following the assassination of Caesar, one of the assassins, Brutus, minted coins with the 'freedom cap' (pileus) in between two daggers, symbolising freedom from the tyranny of the oppressor.¹¹ It was not just upon the death of an Emperor that 'freedom caps' were used. The imperial historian Suetonius noted upon the death of Nero in 68CE: "Such was the public rejoicing that the people put on liberty caps and ran about all over the city"¹².

¹ [Dressed in the past: the stories they tell | National Archives](#)

² [Before MAGA: Mithras, Phrygian hats and the politics of headwear | Hyperallergic.com](#)

³ [Before MAGA: Mithras, Phrygian hats and the politics of headwear | Hyperallergic.com](#)

⁴ [The MAGA hat is not a political statement...it is a declaration of identity | The Washington Post.](#)

⁵ [Before MAGA: Mithras, Phrygian hats and the politics of headwear | Hyperallergic.com](#)

⁶ [Before MAGA: Mithras, Phrygian hats and the politics of headwear | Hyperallergic.com](#)

⁷ [Before MAGA: Mithras, Phrygian hats and the politics of headwear | Hyperallergic.com](#)

⁸ [Before MAGA: Mithras, Phrygian hats and the politics of headwear | Hyperallergic.com](#)

⁹ [The Position of Women in the late Roman Republic | jstor.com](#)

¹⁰ [Before MAGA: Mithras, Phrygian hats and the politics of headwear | Hyperallergic.com](#)

¹¹ [Denarius of Brutus | University of Cambridge](#)

¹² [Before MAGA: Mithras, Phrygian hats and the politics of headwear | Hyperallergic.com](#)

Accordingly, the presence of a hat in the context of ancient Rome became an insignia of resistance and freedom from oppression.

Derivative of the 'pileus' is the phrygian hat - or liberty hat - which became prominent during the French and American revolutions of the 17th and 18th century¹³, further asserting the conical, red, felt hat as a symbol of liberty. In 1765, in the period leading up to the American Civil War, the liberty caps were erected on pikes and paraded as symbols of resistance to British colonial rule¹⁴. However, the more prominent use of the *bonnet de la liberté* is its use during the French Revolution of 1789, when France was subject to radical political and social change, during which the hat was a vital accessory¹⁵. It was adopted by all echelons of French society; aristocrats wore it to avoid succumbing to the guillotine, though ironically the hats were felted, often by market women, between beheadings. The hats were sometimes emblazoned with a blue, white and red cockade, Napoleon himself pinned a cockade on his bicorn hat (typical of that of a soldier) at the battle of Waterloo to emphasise his 'man of the people' persona¹⁶. The French flag is adopted from these cockades, and Marianne, the symbol of the French republic is often depicted donning a phrygian hat¹⁷. Consequently, the red hat has evolved significantly, both in its physical 'fashion' - the evolution of a curved apex and embellishment of a cockade - and vast deployment as a political tool. The liberty hat could be easily identified with its bold vermilion colour, and as a physical object; it translated the sentiment of liberty the French people longed for into palpable form. The tangibility the hat offers strengthens political and social movements, uniting the people against a common cause.

The use of a hat also explicitly conveys social status. In 1571, the incumbent British parliament ruled that all non-noblemen and boys over the age of six were to cover their heads with woollen caps on Sundays and holidays¹⁸. Whilst the impetus for implementing such a law was to boost the woollen trade, it prompted the creation of the 'flat cap', a fashion consequently established as the headgear of the working class. Furthermore, as the convention for the upper-class man was that of a top hat¹⁹, social divisions were clearly visible - as in Roman times - merely by glancing at a person's head. Nowhere in the millinery of British women is class so overtly visible. The hats of working-class women emulated those of upper-class women, albeit in cheaper materials²⁰. There was no glaring division between the two in the 'fashion' of their headgear. The political and class connotations inherent in the hats of men are not evident in those of women, indicating that society felt no need to classify women politically, as they had no power, and lacked the vote until 1918²¹. So whilst the flat caps or top hats of their husbands reveal much, history is harder to decipher from a sepia photograph of a flower-bedecked boater.

The Historian might well now consider why people follow fashion at all - especially in relation to the hat more than any other piece of clothing. It is clear why people agree to wear an overcoat, a fashion comparatively little-changed from the cloaks of Roman generals to the sleeved garment of today: fashion exists in part from physical necessity. But why, if you are a worker in 19th century England, do you agree to buy and wear a cap, denoting your economic status? The Historian can follow a trajectory: take the flat cap of a Manchester weaver in 1819. The

¹³ [The Liberty Cap as a Revolutionary Symbol in America and France | University of Chicago](#)

¹⁴ [The Liberty Cap as a Revolutionary Symbol in America and France | University of Chicago](#)

¹⁵ [Before MAGA: Mithras, Phrygian hats and the politics of headwear | Hyperallergic.com](#)

¹⁶ [Phrygian 'Liberty' hat | Age of Revolution](#)

¹⁷ [The Red Cap of Liberty: A study of dress worn by French Revolutionary Partisans | Johns Hopkins](#)

¹⁸ [A Brief History of the flat cap | Gordon Bennet.com](#)

¹⁹ [The Tradition of Wearing hats in Britain and Ireland | DGRATIS.com](#)

²⁰ [History of Wearing Hats for Women | Vintage Fashion Guild](#)

²¹ [Women get the Vote | UK Parliament](#)

weaver manufactured the cloth himself - a matter of pride. Once worn, its social identity was an immediate, tangible link to his cohort. When you have no political power – few working class men had the vote in 1819 - social identity is strength in numbers. Thousands of Manchester weavers joined the protests for Parliamentary reform. They marched in their cloth caps to Peterloo on the second of August 1819 to demand male suffrage. “I picked up a Cap of Liberty; one of the Cavalry rode after me and demanded it; I refused to give it up...[he] then said ‘Damn him. Cut him down!’.”²² Afterwards they lay bloodied, their clothing and those caps “dyed deepest red”, massacred by the Cavalry. The cloth they wove was both literal and historically symbolic – the Socialist symbol of the red flag itself is taken from blood on the clothing of those fighting for their economic status, votes, rights.

The hat also connotes militarism. The beret - in all its colours - remains a shrewd political implement. Perhaps its most renowned use was as the archetypal element of the Black Panthers’ uniform during the struggle for racial equality in 1960s America.²³ The rationale for establishing the uniform was to bolster black pride, giving all African-American youth an identity, something the racist culture of America essentially prohibited. Adopted from the green beret of the armed forces, the hat was a nod to a more militant approach to Civil Rights. The beret is uni-sex: by early 1970s two thirds of the Black Panther members were female²⁴ but the uniform could remain unchanged. Supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement often sport a beret; Beyonce’s backup dancers in her 2016 halftime Superbowl performance donned the caps and in the 2020 issue of British Vogue the black beret was on the front cover.²⁵ It remains a strong insignia of black pride and identity. The might it yielded inspired the brown beret that became a staple for the Latin-American Chicano Civil Rights movement.²⁶ Felt is a cheap fabric, and thus the use of the beret was accessible to all, even those with little wealth. From affordable felt on your head, to freedom? Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara, perhaps the world’s most prominent beret wearer, might quote Marx himself: “A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties”²⁷.

It is arguably only in the 21st century that the use of hats in a political sense has been radicalised by women. During the 2017 women’s march a sea of vibrant pink ‘pussyhats’ could be seen across Washington DC, in protest to the election of Donald Trump²⁸. The name of the hat, and the impetus for its two cat ears, stems from the widely condemned statement of Donald Trump - that he felt the ability to “grab [women] by the pussy”²⁹. The hats could be made from simple knitting patterns shared across social media. The ‘pussyhat’ whilst a material object, is thus powerfully indicative of today’s digital culture and the concomitant culture wars. It went head to head against the MAGA red baseball caps of Donald Trump’s supporters. To the left, the MAGA hats signify white male privilege, violence and white supremacy. To many of the white working class who wear them, they are an expression of socio-economic anger. Globalisation and the loss of manufacturing jobs overseas is, ironically, present even as they protest exactly that - many of the ‘knock-off’, cheaper MAGA hats are made in China³⁰. The notion of liberty is perhaps as malleable as an item of fashion.

²² ‘*The Making of the English Working Class*’ by EP Thompson

²³ [Historiography of the Black Panther Party | University of Cambridge](#)

²⁴ [Women were key in the Black Panther Party | Stanford Clayman Institute for Gender Research](#)

²⁵ [A sign of Revolution: why the black power beret is making a comeback | The Guardian](#)

²⁶ [Brown Berets | Encyclopedia.com](#)

²⁷ ‘*Das Kapital*’ Volume One by Karl Marx.

²⁸ [The Pussyhat | V and A](#)

²⁹ [The Pussyhat | V and A](#)

³⁰ [Posts target Trump with False Claim on MAGA hats | Fact Check.org](#)

In conclusion, it is clear from taking merely one item of clothing - the hat - that fashion can tell us much about society. It demonstrates shifts in culture, attitude and society, changing perceptions of oppression, liberty and freedom. It is the tangibility of clothing that has made it such a social weapon; it allows us all to be a collective, a united force against the oppressor or identifies the ruling class. As Simone De Beauvoir noted: "The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project"³¹. The Historian who follows fashion - from the economic conditions of its manufacture to the cultural identity it signifies - can perhaps better understand that history is not just intellectual, but *visceral*, because it is the study of people: how they lived can in part be understood by how they dressed, helping us analyse why they acted as they did. In this context, the cap is at least equal to the crown.

³¹ *Le Deuxième Sexe* by Simone De Beauvoir.

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