

## REVIEW

DRESS BEHIND BARS: PRISON CLOTHING AS CRIMINALITY. By JULIET ASH (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010, 225pp. £39.50 hb, £14.95 pb)

Historians and sociologists of the prison have typically made only passing reference to prisoners' clothing. This, as far as I am aware, is the first study of the subject undertaken and, interestingly, by a clothing and design historian. Juliet Ash is Tutor in Fashion and Textiles at the Royal College of Art. She has looked at prisoners' clothing around the world since the development of the modern prison, drawing on autobiographical and prisoner interview as well as academic accounts. In addition to the iconic Mayhew and Binny (1862) drawings of Millbank prisoners well known to every prison historian, her text includes photographs of contemporary prison dress and her front cover is gashed with the bright orange of the Guantanamo jump suit. Criminologists familiar with prison history will learn a few things that they did not know from Ash's work, but she has missed opportunities, which is a pity.

Prisoners' clothing, she suggests, has hitherto been ignored by clothing analysts because it lies outside the sphere of commercialized, mass-consumption fashion, perhaps, as well, because prison clothing embodies the reverse of fashion: it represents the imposed denial of personal identity, though it is not unique in that (workplace and school uniforms, for example). Prisoners' resistance to the psychological emasculation represented by prison uniform is a theme that Ash asserts she will take up (p. 7) but, unfortunately, she never gets far beyond the struggle, initially in Britain by Irish Nationalists claiming political status, to wear their own clothing.

In Britain, the heraldic symbol of the broad arrow was from mediaeval times used to mark ordnance purchased by the king. Later, it was used generally to mark Crown property. With the birth of the modern prison, it became the iconic feature of prisoners' clothing, first for transportees in Australia and convict prisoners at home. Prisoners, stripped of their external identities, became the property of the Crown and were clothed uniformly and uncomfortably as such. In the United States, the broad black-and-white stripe was adopted, cheap to manufacture, representative of prison bars, distinctive and humiliating. Prisoners' bodies and the clothing in which they were encased became the embodiment of punishment. Most distinctive and humiliating were the parti-coloured patches in which escapees were and sometimes still are dressed. As far as style was concerned, Ash demonstrates that prisoner uniforms aped the gendered clothing considered appropriate by the middle classes for respectable labourers (see the famous illustration in Mayhew and Binny of women in jackets and mob caps silently at needlework on the galleries in Brixton from 1854).

Ash charts the abandonment of the broad arrow and hoops and the gradual normalization of prison clothing in the twentieth century, though the degradation involved in not having one's own set of underclothing persisted. Nowadays, she finds diverging patterns of provision, the reversion to old-style punitive humiliation represented by Guantanamo orange and Texas pink contrasting with the social democratic cheap

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and normalized high-street, everyday garb issued in Scandinavia. But there are so many other themes she could have explored. There is no reference, for example, to the ambiguous status of remand prisoners and their traditional right, incorporated in the English Prison Rules, to wear their own clothing, *providing* it is 'suitable, tidy and clean'—a provision capable of neatly exploitative interpretation. And, though there's passing reference to prisoners' resistance by customizing their prison-issue clothing (p. 153), no linkage is made to the status hierarchy among prisoners and powerful prisoners' capacity sartorially to demonstrate their dominance.

Finally, a good proofreader would have been useful. John Binny is throughout referred to as Binney (p. 213) and, not for the first time in the criminal justice literature, there are 'just desserts' (p. 105) to be had.

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MAYHEW, H. and BINNY, J. (1862), *Criminal Prisons of London*. London: Charles Griffin & Co.