

Title:

Fashion and its refugees: labour, ethics and activism in neoliberal times

Abstract:

In his critique of the contemporary 'ethics of difference', Alain Badiou argues that the relegation of ethics to the 'recognition of the other' and the 'ideology of human rights' is characterised by a rather dubious, shallow and hierarchical understanding of difference: 'the problem is that the "respect for differences" and the ethics of human rights do seem to define an *identity!* And that as a result, the respect for differences applies only to those differences that are reasonably consistent with this identity (which, after all, is nothing other than the identity of a wealthy –albeit visibly declining– "West")' (Badiou, [1993] 2002, p. 24). Drawing on Badiou's disavowal of the 'ethics of the Other' as 'the servant of necessity', that is, as a complacent, and essentially hierarchical, form of activism that does not disturb the capitalist structures and institutions of worker subordination, this paper aims to critically engage with the 'feminist t-shirt' phenomenon. Printed & statement T-shirts for women have been central to recent feminist protests and demonstrations, including the Women's March on Washington. Some of these t-shirts, however, were actually manufactured by companies that had allegedly used sweatshop labour in Central America. Focusing on the debates around the 'feminist t-shirt' in particular—and the so-called mainstreaming and commodification of feminist politics in general—this paper seeks to interrogate the persistent historical division between the peripheralised material production of fashion, to which the exploitation of cheapened female migrant and refugee labour has always been central, and the Eurocentric symbolic production of fashion and activism, that is, the privileged domain of design, discourse and political subversion. More precisely, this paper will discuss how neoliberal discourses of 'crisis', 'compassion' and 'humanitarianism' obscure, and reinforce, the increasing degradation of work as well as the physical and systemic/discursive violence endured especially by women refugee workers, leading to ever-more authoritarian and hierarchical divisions of humanity and labour.

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Dr Serkan Delice is Lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies at London College of Fashion, UAL. Delice's research is concerned with the connections between fashion and politics. He studies these connections through three concurrent research projects: First, he analyses fashion media discourses on the subject of cultural appropriation in their relationship to new forms of racial and emotional capitalism, white supremacy and cultural imperialism. Secondly, he explores the centrality of refugee and immigration labour to fashion production in contemporary Turkey. This involves an ethnographic study of garment ateliers in Istanbul. Thirdly, he examines the relationships between masculinity, male homosexuality and social and sartorial transgression in Ottoman and contemporary Turkish society. His publications include an extensive collection of essays on queer culture and dissidence in Turkey (in Turkish, co-edited with Dr Cuneyt Cakirlar); a chapter on masculinity and male homosexuality in early modern Ottoman Istanbul published in *Gender and Sexuality in Muslim Cultures* (Routledge, 2015) and a forthcoming chapter on fashion production and the European refugee crisis (Yale 2018).