

Banning Burkinis: The Politics of Beachwear

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For as long as women have gone to the beach to try to enjoy themselves, it seems, people have followed them there to pester them about their clothes. Selina Cheng, Quartz, Aug 24, 2016

Revolutions are often sparked by folly driven ideas about regulating human behaviour. Banning the worship of symbols renders them more sacred than not; prohibiting certain items that would otherwise be embraced with general enthusiasm adds unintended zest.

Women have never been allowed much truck when it comes to fashion, even in areas of life where relaxation has been assumed. The beach as place of relaxation became, in time, a place of police and religious control. Sand, the sea, and titillation; permitting women a certain freedom of wear was all too much. Those in the United States of the pre-First World War era, for instance, faced the ubiquitous tape measurer and expulsion for revealing too much leg, and much else besides.

Even after the slaughter of millions of human beings on the Western front between 1914 and 1918, with millions more perishing to Spanish influenza, a tired globe might well have given up on such urgent strictures on clothing. The onset of global Depression, and collapsing markets, may well have encouraged people to throw in the towel and relax amidst the ruins. Not in the US, with California's Redondo Beach Ordinance in 1933 prohibiting swimsuits shorter than three inches.[1]

The reaction in France to the burkini, a claimed hotchpotch attempt to navigate the injunctions and directives of the Quran, while feeding off the supposed permissiveness of a Western society, has become a trigger-active minefield. This is the flipside of Talibanised thinking, where fashion police move around and punish detractors for not abiding by the set code. The more imaginative censors may well have had visions of sexed up Jihadists, feminised svelte terrorists keen to undermine a state not merely with purpose but appearance.

French Prime Minister Manuel Valls had a very clear reading about women rushing around in their newly made burkinis, nothing less, he suggested, as revolution in dress tampering with the normal order of things. "It's the translation of a political project for a counter-society based on women's enslavement."

The humble burkini, in other words, was a battering ram against the secular idea, not to mention notions of gender equality (for one member of the National Assembly of France, a "gender prison" no less!) and national security.[2] Never mind that in appearance it looks awfully much like an adjusted wetsuit.

Cannes Mayor David Linsard was one of the first out of the blocks, insisting that clothing

restrictions be introduced in the Riviera city. Those not abiding by the ban face fines up to 38 euros. Ange-Pierre Vivon from Corsica followed suit. "Islamist fundamentalists," he trumpeted, "have no business" on the island.

All this was too dramatic for Aheda Zanetti, the Australian designer behind the outfit, who was perplexed from the start at the zealous reaction from French authorities. "My first reaction is... Oh my God, it is just a swimsuit, for God's sake." [3] Perhaps Zanetti was being genuine in her puzzlement, though it has been a masterstroke of free marketing. Naturally, items of clothing can themselves become symbolic reference points, the mote in the eye of some institutions keen to stamp out a form of behaviour. Not that they necessarily know how to do so. For Zanetti, the matter has been unnecessarily complicated by politically dirty hands and overly paranoid minds. Choice is assumed on the part of the wearer. "Its symbolising freedom, healthy living, confidence; it's symbolising a choice [these women] make." It hides the new mothers conscious of their post-natal figures; it conceals those concerned that they might be cooked to a pilchard before the summer sun.

Not so, insist such figures as journalist Hala Arafa, who sees direct links between fashion and fundamentalism. "The fashion worn in the 21st century reflects the progress of (women's rights)... The clothes worn by Muslim fundamentalist women are based on seventh century beliefs." [4]

Arafa goes even further, insisting that the burkini itself promotes a "rape ideology," an excuse for men to behave badly by "linking a woman's honour" to her clothing. This excuse has certain historical truck, though the issue of a fashion ban smacks of the very policing and linking of honour to clothing (in this case, forced adoption of a code) that should be avoided regarding women.

Gradually, the mines are going off in this debate, niggling the beasts of censorship. For one, various social experiments are being conducted. The group Trollstation, which entertains itself with gauging public reaction to such matters as the burkini, decided to conduct a simulated experiment on a British beach.

The designated "police officer" garnered some reaction from individuals after telling, as part of the prank, a burkini wearer to remove the outfit. "She's obviously a Muslim... You cannot discriminate against her religion," tooted a lady who rushed to rescue the damsel as guinea pig. "You cannot do that." [5]

So the tendency continues; woman wears an outfit either provocative in its skimpiness or provocative in its conservativeness. Authorities beset by ideology intervene. The idea of control is never far away. Nor is the morally obsessed tape measurer and politically charged censor. Beaches as bastions of freedom? Forget it.

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Notes

[1] <http://qz.com/765675/photographic-proof-that-women-just-cannot-get-a-break-even-on-the-beach/>

- [2] <https://theconversation.com/banning-the-burkini-reinforces-a-single-story-about-muslim-women-they-need-saving-64180>
- [3] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-18/burkini-australian-designer-mystified-by-french-ban/7764422>
- [4] <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/civil-rights/292335-burkini-toxic-ideology-not-a-dress-choice>
- [5] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-28/burkini-clad-woman-asked-to-leave-british-beach-in-experiment/7792462>

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