



Stitched Up, part 2/2!

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This is the second part in our Special Review section of [Tansy E. Hoskins](#)’ book *Stitched Up - The Anti-Capitalist Book of Fashion*. You can read the first part [here](#).

I found it challenging to write an academic review of a book when the author is unashamed to shed her ideological intentions in the title. “Anti-Capitalist” is a strong word, followed by an even stronger introductory briefing explaining that the author is part of a group of revolutionary Marxists. The introductory chapter



is an attempt at explaining why the concept of competition does not work and must be abolished, as such the chapter ignores basic economic principles along with our economic development since the industrial revolution. An evolution that has, undeniably, led to stark improvements in living and working conditions, technology, education, healthcare and so forth. Hoskins, it seems, wants to spare the “non-Western” world from catching on to these advancements and embarks on an inaccurate historical journey leading to utopian conclusions.

The strong ideological focus of this book makes it impossible for me not to come clean with my own ideological background, though, unlike the author, I try not to force it onto others in a pseudoscientific fashion. So here it is: I am an anarcho-capitalist. The epitome of what Hoskins tries to paint black, I promote a de-regulated form of capitalism where we are all micro-capitalists who can undertake trade without a state or statist corporations dictating the premises of our engagements. Besides being a capitalist, I am also a stylist, a curator of [*I follow her, I follow her*](#), a forthcoming book on Victorian clothing, a model (often considered too fat and short with a BMI of 20 and height of 173cm). I’m the designer of [*Ethnography*](#), a tiny little brand (that none of the mainstream magazines pay attention to), and an organizer of [*Umoja*](#), a yearly African fashion show (one of the most well attended fashion shows in Belgium, yet largely ignored by the magazines due to our choice of alternative models and brands). Last but not least, I’m a PhD student in anthropology. So capitalism aside, I was intrigued to read this book and see if I can share its reflections and arguments.



Kanga clothing

Hoskins finds fashion to be “glorious and terrible” and I can only agree to that. Her book is a compelling read, very contemporary and it does offer interesting insights into the fashion machinery.



She sets out to draft a vision of fashion void of commerce so that it can prosper in a creative, communist setting. Historically, in In communism, clothing never left much room for creativity, Hoskins' idealisation of the Russian Revolution and the rise of Soviet fashion designers is a questionable account, to say the least. World-wide, clothing has always served a functional or propagandist purpose under socialist rule. The most creative fashion plans I have come across in combination with socialism is Mugabe's plans to introduce boldly colourful uniforms for Zimbabweans. Within communism, creativity has only truly flourished where the state failed to be omnipresent. In the German Democratic Republic, citizens went to great risks to smuggle fashion items such as Levi's jeans.

Hoskins criticizes how fashion is reserved for the West and readily quotes Julius Nyerere, the socialist founding father of Tanzania, on the values of indigenous societies. This is a display of ignorance regarding how effectively Nyerere's policies of *Ujamaa* (Swahili for familyhood) stamped out Tanzanian notions of indigeneity and even produced a socialist-conform dress code. My work is on the Maasai, a semi-nomadic people group in Northern Tanzania and Southern Kenya. One Ujamaa campaign was to abolish Maasai fashion and force Maasai, to wear "modern" attire such as the *kanga*, (two strong, practical pieces of cotton women tie together) with its political quotes imprinted on the fabric. The Maasai suffered oppression for refusing to change their appearance.[1] They wear elaborate attires, shifting in fashion "about every seven years", as Maasai mama's tell me "these days the beadwork is white, that is in fashion." The red and blue *shukas* (cotton fabric reminiscent of the Scottish kilt) and beadwork are symbols of revolt against pressure to conform to a standardized socialist dress code.

By juxtaposing capitalism as evil and communism as pure, Hoskins belittles the often dangerous attempts of artists and social groups to organise in a creative manner under socialist rule.



Maasai people



Hoskins explores many fascinating aspects of the fashion industry and everything that is wrong with it: from working conditions in South East Asia to a beauty ideal that is not even shared by consumers. She analyses how a handful of conglomerates dictate both mainstream and high end fashion and set the tone in a media that readily accepts anything for front row seats in fashion shows. Yet heavily laden with ideology, it does not lend itself well to academia. Neither is it helpful to anyone outside the Marxist school of thought. Fashion is an ignorant and arrogant art form that hardly tolerates critics and so the attempt at critique is brave and important. Yet, by framing critique from a very narrow perspective the book falls short of being a manifesto or toolkit for those willing to change the fashion industry and the ways in which fashion is consumed.

Tansy E. Hoskins. 2014. Stitched Up. The Anti-Capitalist Book of Fashion. Pluto Press. 256 pp. ISBN: 9780745334561.

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[1] Schneider, L. 2006 The Maasai's New Clothes. *Africa Today* Vol. 53, No. 1 (Autumn, 2006), pp. 101-131