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Recognizability: ‘The Mingle-Mangle of Apparel’

Nowhere is suche a confused mingle-mangle of apparell [as in England] and such preposterous excess thereof, as anyone is permitted to flaunt it out in what apparell he lusteth himself, or can get by with any kind of meanness, so that it is very hard to know who is noble, who is worshipful, who is a gentleman, who is not.

(Phillip Stubbes [1583] 1972: n.p.)

SOCIABILITY AND RECOGNIZABILITY

The quotation above from a Puritan preacher and Elizabethan moralist exemplifies a persistent preoccupation about being able to ‘know’ or to ‘recognize’ others. The concern to recognize others is a persistent feature of social life. People have a socially developed capacity to ‘read’ or interpret ‘appearance’; this capacity is inter-personal, as in the capacity to identify the moods and dispositions of familiar persons and to identify others in a crowd. It is with the social interpretation of the identities of ‘others’ and its connection with attempts to regulate the presentation of identity that this chapter is concerned.

In this focus on ‘recognition’ I draw attention to its capacity to carry a double sense. On the one hand to ‘recognize’ is to be able to ‘identify’ (as in ‘I recognized Harold standing at the bus-stop’) and on the other to ‘recognize’ is be ‘accorded recognition’ (as in ‘Jane was awarded a prize in recognition of her contribution’). I will develop the argument that both senses of ‘recognize’ are involved in the project of the regulation of appearance through sumptuary law. As I came to grasp this double meaning it occurred to me that there is an interesting parallel with Bourdieu’s
key concept of ‘distinction’ which also carries a double sense. In the first sense ‘distinction’ is again about ‘identification’ (‘Marsupials are distinguished from other mammals by the presence of a pouch’) and the second sense involves some claim to ‘distinction’ as superiority (as in ‘She achieved distinction as a result of her research on marsupials’). There is then a homology between the concepts of ‘recognition’ and ‘distinction’: it is one that I will make use of. Without pursuing this word-play too much further, there are other related terms, such as ‘identity’, that are capable of bearing a related double sense. The link between these words comes from their place in discourses that traverse the self–other relation. At the outset I want to propose the concept of ‘recognizability’ as designating a persistent social concern with Loth aspects of this dualism, with being able to identify others and with processes of claiming and conferring social recognition, advantage or authenticity. In the sense used here recognizability is thus an element in a social terrain of competition and struggle where people seek to secure their identities in the process of identifying with and distinguishing themselves from others. It is in this area, which has come to be designated in another influential strand of social thought as ‘the subject’, which sumptuary law came to intervene.

The recognizability thesis suggests that sumptuary law revolved around a dual project. On the one hand, it offered a solution to pervasive problems in the process of urbanization of coping in a ‘world of strangers’ and of living in ‘the company of strangers’, learning how we are to ‘know’, to ‘identify’, to ‘recognize’ others. Reduced to its simplest the sumptuary imperative was that ‘the Ranks of People should be discerned by their Clothes’ (Cotton Mather 1694: 71). Or, in the words of a London ordinance of 1351, it was desirable ‘that all folks, native and strangers, may have knowledge of what rank others are’ (Riley 1968: 267). This problem is solved in the radically anonymous world of the military where insignia of rank allow everyone to know whether to salute or be saluted. On the other hand, the second project of sumptuary law was concerned with efforts to protect and reinforce hierarchical status claims of dominant classes. I will add an important extension to this second strand, namely that the protection of dominant classes by sumptuary laws intensified as the claims to superiority began to lose hegemony and became challenged by new social forces. The discussion of this second limb will be postponed until the next chapter.