

CHAPTER 9

Cross-Dressing and Political Protest: Parasols and Pitchforks

Key Questions

1. The combination of the festival, carnival, and protest has existed for centuries around the world. How has this combination changed over the centuries? How has it remained the same?
2. How can we understand gender and gender roles, as well as the role of cultural context, in cross-dressed protests and riots? What similarities do we see between times and places as diverse as rural western England in the seventeenth century and urban Tehran, Iran, in the twenty-first century?
3. How have riots or protests with a cross-dressing component helped change or reinforce laws and social policy?
4. What is the role of humor in protests featuring cross-dressing?

Chapter Overview

The first section of this chapter explores the protests and riots throughout England and Wales over the course of three centuries. The poor farmers, artisans, and manual laborers who planned and took part in these protests and riots often used aspects of folk customs that were specific to their village or region—for example, “rough music” or “skimmingtons” in rural England and *ceffyl pren* in Wales. These small villages and communities often governed and policed their own moral and ethical codes. Most of the people in these communities, however, had no voting rights (they did not live in a democracy) and therefore no political power. Protests and riots became their only recourse for achieving social and economic justice. Protesters often cross-dressed to express their disapproval of policies, such as inflated grain, food, and housing prices,

that threatened them with starvation and homelessness. These policies were often put in place by royalty or the landed gentry.

In these cross-dressing riots, gender transgressions had a specific purpose and occurred for a limited amount of time. The working-poor rioters and protesters donned clothing that was not “appropriate” to their gender. But the men did not wear women’s nightdresses and bonnets in order to pass as women, nor did the women who wore men’s coveralls do so in order to pass as men. In fact, the protesters wanted to look outlandish and humorous; they were not interested in passing, but they *purposefully* transgressed the gender binary. Their specific reasons for crossing the binary were unique to each protest.

The second section of this chapter moves into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to explore protests that used cross-dressing and humor to make a political point. In Boulder, Colorado, in the 1990s a group of cross-dressing protesters known as “The Ladies” or “Ladies in Support of the President” (LISP) appeared over a two-year period at various events, ranging from antiwar protests to rallies in support of LGBT rights and women’s rights. These peaceful protestors used cross-dressing satirically to point to social inequalities. In the twenty-first century, a group of men in Iran have launched a social media campaign in which they take selfies and videos of themselves in their wives’, sisters’, or mothers’ hijabs to protest Iran’s rigid clothing restrictions, which have been in place for the last few decades. Their actions protest not only the clothing itself, but also the restrictions on women’s rights in Iran.

The protests and riots explored in this chapter have one thing in common: the cross-dressing took place to protest and/or riot against political and socioeconomic power being exerted over groups of disempowered people. The cross-dressing in these riots used, or uses, humor to raise awareness about serious issues of social inequality and injustice.

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