

The Commodified Aestheticization of the Chap

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Abstract

The article critically addresses the contemporary British chap movement and its manifestations by contextualizing it in the cultural history of 20th- and 21st-male subcultures. The central point of this movement is an aestheticization of male identity. The movement's preference for apparels from the Edwardian Period and the 1920s will be analysed in the light of theories about nostalgia, which include that nostalgia has radical potentials. The question asked in the article is if and to what extent the chap movement as a subculture is subversive and radical. The inherent contradictions of the movement between its subversive potentials and commodification of the gentleman concept have their release in the ironic, but real Chap Olympics event, and in the satirical style of the *Chap Magazine* and of its book publications. The website of the Chap Magazine is <http://thechap.co.uk/>.

Keywords Chap, gentleman, male identities, aestheticization, subcultures.

What is a Chap?

This article addresses an aestheticization of male identity in the contemporary British chap movement. First the chap movement will be presented. The aestheticizing function of it will then be addressed in the context of nostalgia, in the context of male identities, including the concept of the gentleman, subcultures, and finally in the context of aesthetic capitalism, as defined by Böhme (2016).

The documentation of the chap movement is extensive, and the methodology of this article rests on this documentation set in a critical light of theories of nostalgia, subcultural retro movements, hyper consumerism, and aesthetic capitalism. Its central text is the magazine, *The Chap*, which was founded in 1999. There exists a large array of other relevant books for example *The CHAP Manifesto: Revolutionary Etiquette for The Modern Gentleman*, *Am I a Chap?* *Cooking for Chaps* and *Drinking for Chaps*, and the history of the movement is delineated in the article “The History of the Chap” (Merry 2019). The scope of the movement is deductible from the fact that its magazine has existed from 1999 now with 100 issues with readers, apart from in the UK, in the USA, Australia and Japan with the biggest EU circulation in Germany with readers that are German, not British Ex-pats (Merry 2019, 19). The majority of readers are mid-30 and male (Stevens 2004). There is a comprehensive website <http://thechap.co.uk/> with a small YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheChapMagazine>. An annual event is the Chap Olympia, which satirically demonstrates the movement’s antagonism towards the whole idea of sport (except cricket) with competitions such as Umbrella Jousting on bicycles and Tie Versus Cravat and Butler Baiting. The movement has staged several public protests through the years. The first was in 2002, “Civilise the City”, and it is described as:

Civilise the City was an organised protest against the perceived vulgarity of the contemporary world. The chaps felt that central London, along with most other cities in Europe, was being buried under a tide of bland, homogenized consumerism, obliterating the heart and soul of the city. Their plan was to march through London in ranks of gentility, taking the precise opposite approach to the typical angry protest, with its ranks of scruffy students and

tattered placards, and everyone shouting and chanting and enraging the constabulary. The only placards held by the Chaps bore slogans such as ‘Civilise the City’, ‘Give Three-Piece a Chance’ and ‘Make Gloves, Not War.’ (“About protests” 2019)

Other public protests were directed against certain kinds of modern art at Tate Modern, The Abercrombie and Fitch Protest or The Siege of Saville Row, which was against the proposed opening of a new store on Savile Row by Abercrombie & Fitch, or in defence of English bespoke tailoring with the slogan “Give Three-piece a Chance”. A chapter in *The Chap Manifesto* (Temple and Darkwood 2001, 131-137) is devoted to “Chappist Propaganda” with stickers (“Chivalry Gets Results”, “Courtesy is Contagious”), letter writing, an amnesty to use mobile phones only for propaganda purposes and “A Final Call to Charms”.

The Manifesto of the Chap Movement (2019) indicates the composite nature of the movement. It combines gentlemanly and manly behaviour with a stylish appearance, and this combination is expressed with wit and irony; but an ideological stance is also present. For example, Commandment no. 5: “THOU SHALT ALWAYS DOFF ONE’S HAT. Alright, so you own a couple of trilbies. Good for you – but it’s hardly going to change the world. Once you start actually lifting them off your head when greeting, departing or simply saluting passers-by, then the revolution will really begin.” With its stylistically incongruous juxtaposition of the biblical “THOU” with “ONE’S HAT”, this admonition to chaps of behaving like a gentleman of old is then again coupled to changing the world and starting a revolution. However, what ties these seemingly incongruous elements together is that the outward appearance of a chap has subversive qualities and is a manifestation of a cultural critique of modernity. Dressing with style and panache means more than appearance; for example, “THOU SHALT ALWAYS WEAR TWEED”, “THOU SHALT NEVER, EVER, WEAR PANTALOONS DE NIMES” or “THOU SHALT NEVER FASTEN THE LOWEST BUTTON ON THY WAISTCOAT” are a critique of the mores of present-day life of men. These examples are nostalgic, but as we shall see below, the article argues that this form of nostalgia may well be radical. What can also be seen, is that gentlemanly behav-

our is tied to dressing like one, and this aestheticization is a form of quite expensive commercialization inherent in chapism.

The etymology of the term “chap” offers a clue to an understanding of the name of the movement and to why it can be examined in the context of aestheticization, especially commodified aestheticization. The word is an abbreviation of 16th century “chapman”, meaning trader, dealer, purchaser and customer, which derived from Old English *ċeapmann*. In the 18th century, the meaning became (young) man, and today this use has archaic and colloquial, but also “posh” connotations (*OED*). The archaic character of the word can be perceived from Google’s Ngram Viewer (Figure 1).

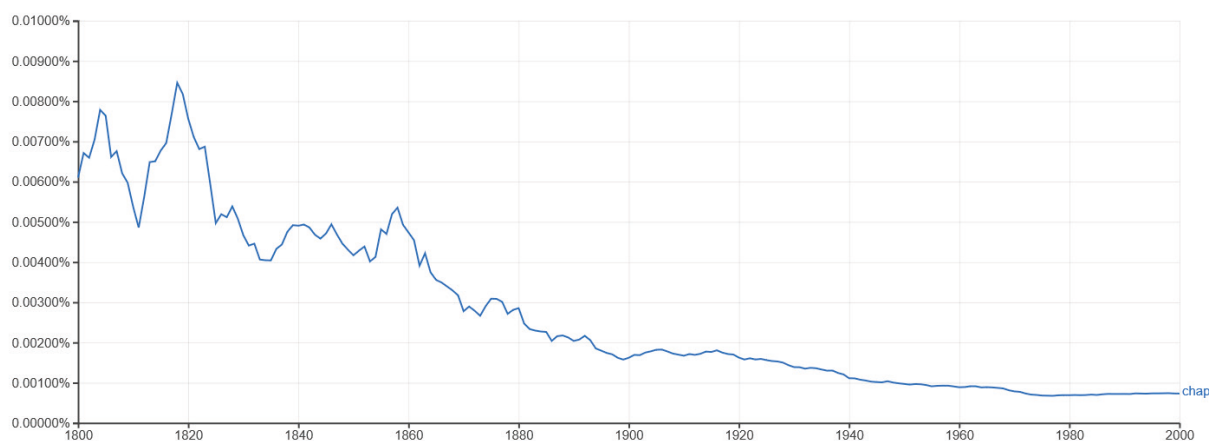


Figure 1. Google’s Ngram Viewer illustrates how the occurrence of word “chap” has been less frequent since around 1900.

A chap is comparable with a gentleman. Etymologically, a gentleman belonged to the English gentry. The *OED* defines “gentle” as “to ennoble” and “to render mild or pleasant”. Onions (1988) does not mention the class aspect, and it defines “gentle” as “kind, mild and pleasantly calm”. A more critical description is Berberich’s: “When we hear the term, we might think of Englishness; of class; of masculinity; of elegant fashions; of manners and morals. But we might also think of hypocrisy; of repression; of outdated behaviour befitting the characters of a Victorian novel” (Berberich 2007, 3).

Nostalgia

The predilection of the chap movement and its marketing of bespoke tailoring, Harris tweed, pocket watch chains, cravats, moustaches and doffing hats has an old-world look, with echoes of the

Arts and Craft movement with its insistence on handmade quality products. Dressing (up) historically in this manner is exemplified in the “Get The Look”-webpage with Jarrow Marchers boots and suggestions of dressing like characters from the *Peaky Blinders* TV-series, which is set in Birmingham in the aftermath of the First World War. Similarly, when the chap is working manually should he not be:

clothed in suitable attire? The outfit should reflect the task to hand, but contemporary tradesmen’s styling (tracksuit bottoms, hoodie and the unsheathed backside) has no place in a Chap’s universe. To explore the more traditionalist attitude to manual labour, we have carefully curated a selection of robust items of workwear that will still cut the sartorial mustard (“Get The Look” 2018).

And the concrete suggestions are a George Baker Boy Hat, a Granddad Shirt in Heavy Cotton Stripe, Cotton Engineer Cardigan, and Hob Nail Boots. Contemporary fashion such as e.g. “tracksuit bottoms, hoodie and the unsheathed backside” is unacceptable.

This traditionalist attitude is not unreflected. The use of the term from museology in the above quotation, “curated” demands a closer examination of the form of nostalgia in the chap movement. Boym (2001) connects the past, nostalgia and museums. In the 19th century, nostalgia became institutionalized in museums and memorials, and the past became heritage (Boym 2001, 15). She further relates nostalgia to a contradictory reaction to modernity and to its temporal ambivalence. She introduces a cultural category of off-modernists. They “mediate between modernists and postmodernists, frustrating the scholars. The eccentric adverb “off” relieves the pressure of being fashionable and the burden of defining oneself as either pre- or postmodern.” (ibid., xvi-xvii) It is possible to apply the term off-modern to chaps, but to put chaps and their movement into a more precise context of nostalgia, the concept of nostalgia must be defined more closely.

According to Boym, nostalgia in its basic form is a longing defined by loss of the original object of desire and by its spatial and temporal displacement (ibid., 38); but she then divides nostalgia into two opposing forms, restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia concentrates on the imagined past and seeks to

rebuild it. This kind of nostalgia is characteristic of nationalist movements and revivals, and it wants to rebuild the past and its monuments. It is anti-modern, and Boym writes that “Restorative nostalgia takes itself dead serious.” (ibid., 49)

Reflective nostalgia concentrates on the longing for the lost past and the loss of it, and as such it is an ongoing process about imperfect remembrance. Where restorative nostalgia prefers reconstructions of the past and its monuments, reflective nostalgia prefers ruins and dreams of the past; yet it does not take the form of only individual anxiety, but it reveals the contradictions of modernity. In contrast to restorative nostalgia, Boym writes, “Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, can be ironic and humorous. It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve from compassion, judgment and critical reflection”, and she concludes that “This type of nostalgic narrative is ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary.” (ibid.) These theoretical observations can be applied to the chap movement and its combination of nostalgia in dress and gentlemanly mores, while at the same time retaining a critically reflective attitude to modernity, and precisely as Boym formulates it: “it is aware of the gap between identity and resemblance” (ibid., 50). A chap may resemble and aestheticize himself as an Edwardian gentleman, but he is well aware of his present time and its culture, and as we will see now, as a member of a subculture may want to change it.

This ambivalent attitude of a chap to the past in his own present may be explained by what Bonnett (2009) sees as dilemmas of radical nostalgia. Where Boym separates her two strands of nostalgia, Bonnett, more precisely, contraposes and them in radical, avant-garde and subversive movements, e.g. Situationism and psychogeography, which blossomed in the early 1990s. Psychogeography with its link to Situationist Internationals explored urban environments in a subversive, but playful manner to dissolve the boundaries between art and life and to change the emotions and behavior of individuals (Debord 1955). In this “newly confident politics of nostalgia can be glimpsed within this milieu: at the counter-cultural margins of society radicalism is (once again) becoming tied to a popular politics of loss.” (Bonnett 2009, 49-50), and a part of this is “an ‘elitist’ aversion to commercial popular culture” (ibid., 51). These are characteristics that can be applied to the chap movement

as well, together with the ludic and humorous behaviour, which Bonnet also sees in the movements, and he concludes that “today the shame of nostalgia is fading.” (ibid., 67). Smith and Campbell (2017) go one step further. They dismiss Boym’s claim that nostalgia of the reflexive kind is ironic (Boym 2001, 49), and they promote nostalgia to being productive and a tool to shape the future and to understand the present. They separate what they call the affective practice of nostalgia, from Boym’s tainting of nostalgia with melancholia. Nostalgia is “available for inspiring thinking and imagining that is oriented to the future.” (Smith and Campbell 2017, 612) In their research of heritage, they distinguish between “reactionary” nostalgia and “progressive” nostalgia to concentrate on the latter. Based on a range of scholars they conclude that nostalgia can be radical, used in socially and politically progressive ways, and that nostalgia “can be an explicit process that critically engages and navigates ways of positively addressing social change” (ibid., 614).

In the chapter “Fashion, Retro and Vintage”, Reynolds (2011) zooms in on the connection between the past and fashion and specifically he traces a movement from the present around 1965 to retro and vintage fashion in what he calls “the Rift of Retro” (Reynolds 2011, 185), when clothing became a marker of taste with exoticism through time, defined for fashionable predilection for “Victoriana, Edwardiana, twenties and thirties influence”. These periods are the ones also preferred by chaps as recommended in issues of *Chap Magazine* and advertised there by antiquarian shops, similar to the kinds of boutiques, which Reynolds sees coming in the late 1960s. They merge fashion with antiquarianism, and they satisfy the consumerism of subcultures, e.g. in that period the Mods, for original period garments, with their opposition to mass-produced clothing. This is a contradiction also inherent in the chap movement, which follows the path of subcultures as described by Reynolds.

This article will now examine whether the chap movement uses the radical and subversive potential of nostalgia, more specifically whether it at all or to what extent it can be termed avantgarde, Situationist and psychogeographic? Can the chap movement as a subculture be said to use the strategy of rituals of resistance (Muggleton 2002, 3) as prescribed in its manifesto, or is it limited to “style-as-resistance” in the spirit of Bordieuan distinctions of taste (ibid., 42)?

The Avant-gardist Chap

In an article in *The Chap*, “Situationism for Chaps” (Burke 2017), Jim Burke asks, after an exposition of the Situationist International and its history:

What has all of this to do with the periodical you have in your hands? Chappist historians will of course remember such adventures as ‘Civilise the City’ and the moment in May 2004 when some fine coves, our dear editor included, formed a ‘human cufflink’ around Rachel Whiteread’s ‘Untitled (Room 101)’ sculpture in the V&A Cast Courts. (ibid., 50)

Burke continues that this is not the only connection between the Situationist and the chappist life, and he points out that the Situationist flaneur shares similarities with a chap, when drifting and meandering in the metropolis, the Situationist method called *dérive*. This method consists in strolling literally aimlessly through the ambiances of the city with an awareness of their so-called psychogeographical effects. Though there was no geographic goal, the aim was to resist the malaise of the society of the spectacle. The society of the spectacle is what the father of Situationism Guy-Ernest Debord, called the condition in the “historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life” (Debord 2011 / 1988, thesis 42), and when relations between commodities have replaced relations between people in society. A Situationist method to combat the society of the spectacle was to create situations, which changed the perceptions of geographical locations (Coverley 2010, 92-97). This method is the one employed by the chappists in their protests, as for instance Civilise the City, but also in a wider sense, more everyday sense, by dressing always in tweed and doffing one’s hat.

These avant-gardist aspects of the chap movement must, however, be weighed against its stress on Dandyish fashion. Is the chap merely dressing up as a Situationist, or does he actually perform the subversive actions of one? The answer must necessarily be nuanced. By dressing stylishly in a retro or vintage manner and behaving like a gentleman in the metropolitan streets there are aspects of the *dérive*, so that “style-as-resistance” does indeed exhibit a counter im-

age to present-day mass consumerism. Yet at the same time the conspicuous fashion of the chap is in itself another form of consumerism and aesthetic commodification. This commodification can be explained and contextualised in present-day male identities.

The Context of Male Identity

Though the term chapette has been included in the vocabulary of the chap movement for a female chap, the movement is essentially male, and one may ask what kind of a man a chap is. Genz and Brabon (2009) may provide an answer or at least an understanding of the male chap. They call the contemporary male a “postfeminist man”, and this male identity they characterize as “a compound identity, revealing the fact that numerous representations of masculinity may coexist in new, hybrid forms” (Genz and Brabon 2009, 143), or the contemporary male is a “bricolage masculinity” (ibid., 137). This bricolage has three ingredients consisting of late 20th-century male types: the new man, the metrosexual male and the new lad; but they all three have a common characteristic: commercialised masculinity (ibid., 136). Genz and Brabon characterize this new man a development of the caring man of the 1970s, who was influenced by feminism, so that he participated in the parts of everyday life traditionally placed in a feminine sphere. However, the later development of this now historical new man was that his newness has become an empty lifestyle signal and a legitimation of consumption. Simpson (2002) described the metrosexual male as “a young man with money to spend, living within easy reach of a metropolis”. Simpson’s description of the metrosexual male stressed the consumerist and narcissist aspects more than actual social mores. His male gaze was directed at a brand-conscious self-representation in the mirror more than considering other people in social life. Like the new man, the new lad has historical aspects, and he may be regarded as a reaction against the new man, as his identity reflects the historical industrial working-class, male culture, from before feminism, and it deviates from the also historical gentlemanly and class-bound aspects of British male identity.

Though the chap is distinct in some ways from the bricolage male identity defined by Genz and Brabon, he certainly shares its consumerist or commercialized characteristics. The new lad’s behaviour is not acceptable in any way to a chap, though a chap may

dress up as one, as we have seen it in the form of the fictional costumes from the television series *Peaky Blinders*. The co-founder, Gustav Temple, of the movement and its magazine, *The Chap*, distances it from the lad male identity, when he characterizes the profile of the magazine that “When launched in 1999, its message was completely at odds with the prevailing culture of lads’ mags.” (Temple 2017) On the other hand, the aestheticization inherent in the chap concept can make a mirror as dear to a chap as it was to the metrosexual male.

However, it can be concluded that gentlemanly behavior and the subversive ideological commitment of the chap movement are what sets it apart from the three male types described above and it is an innovative form of male identity with a spectrum of historical roots.

Conclusion: The Context of Aesthetic Capitalism

This conclusion seeks to explain the contradictory nature of the chap movement with its fusion of commercialization of male aesthetic identity and avant-gardist subversion by placing it in the wider context of aesthetic capitalism.

Böhme (2016) defines aesthetic capitalism as the latest step in the development of the relationship between the exchange and use value of the commodity as they have been defined in classic Marxist economic theory and addressed further by Haug (1971) in his discussion of commodity aesthetics. Böhme’s argumentation rests on the critical theories of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Bourdieu, Baudrillard and Foucault, whom he does not reject but rather combines and reformulates.

Use value refers to a product’s utility in satisfying human needs, whereas exchange value is secondary and tied to the product as a commodity in the form of its aesthetics qualities, which makes it attractive to a prospective customer, e.g. its symbolic connotations in its packaging or in its marketing as in commercials. Böhme takes the exchange value one step further. He claims that exchange value is the new use value in so far as its use is the mise-en-scène of the customer in a contemporary culture characterized by surplus consumption. This surplus consumption is no longer tied to luxury or to upper-class life styles but is a general characteristic of Western capitalist society where Böhme stresses that this surplus consumption has the functions of “der Ausstattung des Lebens, im Sehen

und Gesehen-Werden, im Hören und Gehört-Werden, und in der Steigerung der Mobilität, der physischen einerseits und der virtuellen andererseits". (Böhme 2016, 15¹) An example of this function in a chap-setting is how the traditional exchange value of jeans in the sphere of commodity aesthetics with its symbolic connotations of the American Frontier and cowboy life has been supplanted by rule #4 from the Manifest "THOU SHALT NEVER, EVER, WEAR PANTALOONS DE NIMES", but instead a bespoke three-piece tweet suit with a watch chain attached.

In perspective of the ideological aspects of the chap movement, Böhme acknowledges some avantgarde and subversive functions of the new surplus consumption in aesthetic capitalism. He incorporates ludic elements in this lifestyle (Böhme 2016, 41), and he rejects Horkheimer's and Adorno's separation of art and the mass culture of the culture industry. So, artistic aspects are included in the consumerism of aesthetic capitalism and in the general aestheticization of life and this has allowed an avantgarde to articulate itself in this context, and this avantgarde is subversive (ibid., 43-44). In this respect the influence from Marcuse becomes apparent (ibid., 40-41; Marcuse 1965). Böhme concludes, "Die Ästhetisierung der Realität, die durch die ästhetische Ökonomie vorangetrieben wird, ist durchaus ambivalent" (ibid., 44²), and it is also the conclusion of this article that this ambivalence is what characterizes the chap movement with its irony, radical nostalgia and balancing between the ideals of a gentleman and a chap, the latter being aestheticized by surplus consumerism and commodification of male identity.

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Notes

- 1 "The décor of life, in seeing and being seen, in hearing and being heard, and in the intensification of physical mobility on the one hand and virtual mobility on the other" (My translation).
- 2 "The aestheticization of reality, which is accelerated by the aesthetic economy, is totally ambivalent" (My translation).