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The power of the hoodie

The hoodie was everywhere during the UK riots. But how did a comfy, utilitarian item of clothing become the ultimate symbol of exclusion and menace?

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Feared, derided, misunderstood and still resolutely un-hugged, the utilitarian, hugely popular sportswear garment, the hoodie, has staged a comeback against a backdrop of pyromania and rioting. Worn by millions every day: a generation's default wardrobe choice was transformed into an instant criminal cloak for London's looting youth. It may be more newsworthy now, but the hoodie and the folk devil it represents have been with us for a long time.

In 2007 I reported from the riots that set the Parisian *banlieue* suburbs alight, and interviewed teenagers who had been involved with or close to the events. Most of them wore hoodies, along with the other staples of the 21st-century, hip-hop redux wardrobe – tracksuit bottoms or voluminous jeans, expensive trainers, baseball caps, black Thinsulate gloves and the occasional bandana.

A year or so later, I met youths involved in gangs around the time of the London murders of teenagers Billy Cox, James Andre Smart-Fordd and Michael Dosunmu. These two groups may have been separated by the English channel, but the uniform was identical, and the hoodie was as ubiquitous as the two-piece suit in the financial centres of Paris and London.

Whether or not David Cameron ever spoke his infamous "hug a hoodie" words, let alone made good on his views, it's true that the hoodie was a political symbol long before it became a policy initiative. All clothing is political in the sense that it communicates a message about how the wearer wishes to be perceived, and face coverings and headgear can be particularly charged: the use of balaclavas by sectarian paramilitaries, bandanas worn across the face, or caps worn low to disguise the eyes, represent a seizing of anonymity and a self-exemption from public identification.

As for the hoodie, its mass adoption as an everyday item began with the parallel popularity of hip-hop imported from the US in the 1980s, where rappers modelled themselves as athletes in a bid to emulate the power and success of world-beating sports stars. The corporate balance sheet of Adidas would doubtless be a lot poorer without the patronage of rappers Run-DMC, or reggae star Bob Marley.

Hip-hop later turned to gang culture for its stylistic cues, and it is probably impossible to say whether gangsters modelled themselves on hip-hop stars or vice versa. Either way, hip-hop's emphasis on strength, status and prowess ensured that Rocky Balboa's grey marl hoodie would become the iconic, indispensable wardrobe staple for a generation weaned on rhymes and beats.

Somewhere, however, the gangster overtones trumped the sporting counterparts; in London a few years ago, there was even a vogue for teenagers to wear hoodies with horizontal black and white stripes, as if in parodic homage to cartoon robbers carrying bags marked "swag". Once, the hoodie was worn to convey an images of power and success; later on, it became a symbol of menace and lawlessness, and that is undoubtedly central to its identification with Britain's asbo generation.

"Leisure- and sportswear adopted for everyday wear suggests a distance from the world of office [suit] or school [uniform]," Angela McRobbie, professor of communications at Goldsmiths College, once told the Guardian. "Rap culture celebrates defiance, as it narrates the experience of social exclusion. Musically and stylistically, it projects menace and danger as well as anger and rage. [The hooded top] is one in a long line of garments chosen by young people, usually boys, and inscribed with meanings suggesting that they are 'up to no good'."

So, too, did Eminem – a devout hoodie-wearer – articulate the internalised rage and dispossession of western suburban teenagers by burying his head in a hoodie to keep the invading world outside.

By the early noughties in the UK, the hoodie had become directly politicised, symbolising the furtive menace of Britain's inner-city teenage population. In May 2005, it was banned by the Bluewater shopping centre in Kent and later by several schools in England and Wales. One teenager was even served with an asbo banning him from wearing one for five years.

Yet not every kid in a hoodie was necessarily "a hoodie": the comfy, cheap, utilitarian item was a staple in a variety of self-consciously "outcast" youth tribes, from BMXers and skaters to surfers and emos, none of which is strongly linked to antisocial behaviour. Its stigma, however, was already there as the hoodie became the shorthand for Middle England's newest folk devil (the same thing happened in France, by the way: "Sarkozy stigmatised a whole group of kids who have the look of those who act violently," Samuel Thomas of SOS Racisme told me in 2007, commenting on the identity of the rioter. "Because they wear a cap, tracksuit, a scooter, shaved head, because he's of African descent.").

Regardless of its origins, however, for the kids who live in the suburbs and inner-city estates where threat and violence are everyday realities, the hoodie is, above all, a tool for blending in,

rather than standing out - the common function of clothes marketed as stylish or functional.

For sure, a hoodie is a useful tool to avoid identification for a range of gang-related rituals. Yet for teenagers under intense peer pressure to conform to a collective identity, acceptance means adopting an prescribed outfit. For some, there may be no choice but to wear one and shoulder its associations.

David Cameron, in a rare outbreak of understanding, told the Centre for Social Justice in 2006 that hoodies were "a way to stay invisible in the street. In a dangerous environment the best thing to do is keep your head down, blend in, don't stand out."

He was right, though his painstakingly scripted aperçus didn't even begin to address the real reasons why a generation of young people choose to retreat into the invisibility cloak of the hoodie and escape the harsh realities of their troubling present and dystopian future: spiralling living and education costs, a savage employment market, future living standards likely to be lower than their parents, and zero prospect of home ownership along with a collective societal suspicion of teenagers as a whole.

Kids in hiding, afraid of being seen, and at the same time embodying in their everyday uniform the furtive tunnel-vision that seems to define their bleak, introspective vision of the world outlook. Perhaps that's the real meaning of the hoodie.

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