

THE NOTION OF PROSPERITY IN THE AESTHETICS OF FASHION

A RELIGIOUS GENEALOGY

ALBERTO FABIO AMBROSIO

Luxembourg School of Religion & Society

alberto.ambrosio@lsrs.lu

Orcid 0000-0003-2049-3933

Copyright: © Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.
Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.
Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36253/fh-3225>

Abstract

The notion of prosperity has its own religious genealogy: in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber famously linked the notion of prosperity with the Protestant Reformation. As crucial as Weber's theory is for different approaches to luxury, this paper focuses, instead, on a different understanding of prosperity in fashion, thus paving the way for a new religious genealogy of the notion. This genealogy imagines an approach to fashion that sees prosperity as happiness. Indeed, from a religious and ethical perspective, prosperity is, first and foremost, the search for happiness in this life. Several monotheistic traditions overlap the notion of prosperity with that of divine grace or blessing, meaning that true prosperity can only be achieved through the exercise of virtues. Thus, only virtues can create a new meaning and new aesthetics of prosperity in fashion. By offering a more theoretical reflection on the notion of prosperity in fashion, this paper intends to determine whether different forms of aesthetics might offer a clue for the understanding of prosperity and wealth in order to herald true prosperity in fashion.

Keywords: *Theory of Fashion, Theology, Aesthetics of brands, Sociology of Religion*

INTRODUCTION

This contribution sets forth from Weber's reflection according to which, from an anthropological and sociological perspective, capitalism would have a religious origin that indeed makes it possible to speak of a theological archaeology of its spirit. This starting point allows us to undertake further research on the possible derivations of this spirit when it comes to aesthetics – that is, the manifestation of such spirit – as it develops in the Protestant and Catholic spheres of influence. Weber hinges his idea of the spirit of capitalism on a speech delivered by Benjamin Franklin in which the latter posited the conditions that make work, time, and production all merge into the accumulation of capital, where capital can be understood in many

different ways. According to Weber's reading of capitalism:

The concept spirit of capitalism is here used in this specific sense, it is the spirit of modern capitalism. For that we are here dealing only with Western European and American capitalism is obvious from the way in which the problem was stated. Capitalism existed in China, India, Babylon, in the classic world, and in the Middle Ages. But in all these cases, as we shall see, this particular ethos was lacking. (Weber, 2000, p. 18)

Weber points out that capitalism not only concerns human greed but is also an ethos in its own right, a manner of behaving and living life: capitalism

has its own spirit because it entails a certain ethics. The notion of the spirit of capitalism and its ethos, which is derived from a religious form of asceticism and puritanism, as Weber argues in the second part of his book, can also be useful when discussing fashion, which is one of its epiphenomena. Thus, the aesthetics of fashion too could similarly find its origins in religion. This would imply the existence of an aesthetics of fashion that in its shapes, colours, trends, etc. is the reflection of a spirit which is more Protestant than Catholic or vice versa. Thus, aesthetics is to fashion as the spirit is to capitalism and the history of fashion offers some excellent examples of this: Gabrielle Chanel's aesthetics is moulded also by her attendance at a school run by Catholic nuns, whilst Hermès's expression is altogether more Protestant; Yves Saint Laurent has his cultural roots in Catholicism, whilst Vivienne Westwood represents British culture at large, including its religion. The line of demarcation between these differing yet all clearly religiously inspired aesthetics is sobriety or, to put it better, aesthetic minimalism, which means that we have to find the epistemological nexus at the origin of the religious genealogy of fashion expressions as inspired by Protestantism, Catholicism, or Anglicanism, to remain within the geo-cultural horizon of the West and the Christian tradition.

THE RELIGIOUS GENEALOGY OF PROSPERITY IN FASHION

In 1905, the same year when the German philosopher Georg Simmel published his *Philosophie der Mode* (1911) in German (translated into English in a shorter format in 1910), Max Weber left his mark on the history of religious sociology with the publication of one of his most renowned works, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2000). Weber's essay has often been misunderstood and hastily summarised in such a way as to attribute to Protestantism the only origin of the spirit of capitalistic accumulation. Its underlying proposition, instead, is that the one form of ethics capable of originating a real spirit of capitalism is Christian Pietism. So, the source of capitalism should not be found in Catholicism or Protestantism per se, but rather in that religious ethos of asceticism and puritanism more easily found in Protestant denominations but also present in Catholicism, though differently expressed. Proof of this is the fact that the spirit of capitalistic accumulation is active also in the Catholic sphere. Weber

clarifies what he means by 'spirit of capitalism' in the first chapter of his work: though the entire history of humanity bears witness to a frantic, obsessive search for the accumulation of gold and, consequently, of riches, the spirit of capitalism somehow manages to add to or deeply modify this virtually natural propensity.

In 1913, and thus around the same time as Weber's reflection, Werner Sombart, another German sociologist who worked with Weber, offered his own contribution to the relationship between luxury and capitalism (1967). A few years earlier, another economist, Thorstein Veblen, had focused especially on the ostentatious consumption of the so-called 'leisure class' (1899).

Yet it is certainly Weber who is at the forefront of the reflection on prosperity and lays the foundations for a religious archaeology of the notions of economic prosperity and aesthetic ostentation. Indeed, ostentation and prosperity intersect one another without necessarily overlapping fully. When talking about German entrepreneurs, Weber says that, unlike what Veblen had observed for the United States, ostentation is not necessary:

The ideal type of the capitalistic entrepreneur, as it has been represented even in Germany by occasional outstanding examples, has no relation to such more or less refined climbers. He avoids ostentation and unnecessary expenditure, as well as conscious enjoyment of his power, and is embarrassed by the outward signs of the social recognition which he receives. (Weber, 2000, p. 33)

Weber does not see ostentation, which finds its roots in the ancient military language used to boast the power of a state or a people, as an absolute criterion for the identification of the leisure class, that is, the capitalistic middle class. Here, we can glimpse at the Protestant imagery of aesthetic minimalism manifesting itself as the absence of ostentation. So, just like the Protestant temple is devoid of any signs, icons, or forms of Christian art, Protestant aesthetics too, including when it comes to fashion, might have a minimalist character of its own.

In other passages, Weber makes this connection explicit when he references Calvinist asceticism and takes clothing as an example:

The conceptions of idle talk, of superfluities, and of vain ostentation, all designations of an irrational attitude without objective purpose, thus not ascetic, and especially not serving the glory of God, but of man, were always at hand to serve in deciding in favour of sober utility as against any artistic tendencies. This was especially true in the case of decoration of the person, for instance clothing. (Weber, 2000, p. 113-114)

Ostentation in clothing is a tendency to be rebuffed in the name of an authentically religious spirit, at least within the Puritanism that Weber takes as his starting point. Note 70 makes this relationship explicit by bringing the example of seventeenth-century Quackers, who underwent a ten-year-long crisis when they arrived in the United States from Amsterdam because of the fashionable hats worn by the pastor's wife. What in other epochs and contexts is defined as modest fashion or modesty in clothing comes to outline the internal politics of the community and even the religious aesthetics of fashion. Indeed, if a religious ethos or spirituality can have an impact on the economic system, as Weber argues, then the opposite too must be considered: the spirit underlying an economic system – capitalism, in this case – can influence also its aesthetic expressions and, therefore, its fashionable clothing and fashion itself. Almost by synecdoche, in fact, what is fashionable becomes fashion. Fashion can be examined and studied as a system in its own right (Barile, 2011), that is, as an idea of fashion. This is not the same operation carried out by Roland Barthes (1983), who studied fashion as a system only to expose its 'vanity,' that is, its being a pure system of signs, a language created by language itself. Whilst Roland Barthes's approach continues to remain crucial, here instead we are concerning ourselves with fashion as a system, as a whole, as a philosophy of fashion or as a sociological phenomenon that should be understood in its own right within the social analysis of mass phenomena. When looking at it from this perspective, the system of fashion can be criticised, especially when fashion shows itself as a phenomenon with the potential to drive change (Ambrosio, 2024) only to then turn out to be utterly unable to implement any virtuous transformation (Masci, 2024).

So, can this system lead to real prosperity without being prosperous only in and of itself? Indeed, if fashion is considered only as an

economic system, how else should prosperity be understood if not financially? But fashion has its own aesthetic influence on the societies in which it thrives and so what trends can it introduce on the market?

Some examples from the aesthetics of leading brands can help us understand how a notion of fashion focused on prosperity could finally bring together ethical roots and aesthetic differences. For instance, Vivienne Westwood's symbolism is grounded in the British tradition – as exemplified by the royal cross-topped orb – but the brand has actively renounced using shiny materials: textiles are now chosen rigorously so as to avoid any finish that might prove to be especially polluting. Hermès, on the other hand, has developed a characteristic pietistic minimalism that is typical of Protestant aesthetics and could lead to the introduction of the idea of sobriety on catwalks or, conversely, could also become a further expression of magnificence for haute couture. Finally, Chanel stands out for its long tradition of bicolour styles, especially black and white, that finds its origin in the time Gabrielle Chanel spent in the Catholic school of Aubazine, in France. Whether rightly or wrongly, the brand cultivates to this day the narrative that Chanel's aesthetics is deeply connected to this spiritual – or rather religious – inspiration. All of this is to say that brands can offer powerful interpretations of prosperity and, in many ways, they already do. A real change, though – a conversion, as it were – would be for fashion to become acutely aware of the power it wields when spreading an aesthetics pivoting on prosperity.

Having demonstrated that the notion of prosperity has also a religious genealogy, it is now legitimate to investigate whether the aesthetics of fashion might have a religious manifestation of its own when it comes to prosperity and if such prosperity could be described as a fashion in itself. Indeed, Weber's idea of a relationship between the spirit of capitalism and Protestant ethics also underlies the so-called 'prosperity theology,' a current of Pentecostal Christianity often criticised and eyed with suspicion by other Christian denominations, including the Catholic Church (Spadaro & Figueroa, 2017).

THE ETHICS OF APPEARANCES

So, can fashion contribute to prosperity? And what kind of prosperity would that be? How does prosperity interact with fashionable clothing and fashion itself? Indeed, it is from the starting point of Weber's reflection that we can investigate prosperity, aesthetics of fashion, and religious references. Prosperity is a vast field of investigation that underlies several economic, financial, cultural, and even religious reflections. Vignoli, Roversi, Jatwani, and Tiriduzzi (2021) have attempted to interrogate this notion by stating the need to consider it in all its complexity, yet they take into account neither its religious nor its aesthetic aspects. On the other hand, Moore and Mintchev (2023) clarify that the definition of prosperity entails philosophical reflexivity, if only because each has their own notion of it, depending on culture, locale, and several other variables (2023, p. 28).

The assumption that we are attempting to demonstrate and from which we want to develop a new idea of aesthetic prosperity in fashion comes from the possibility of an interface between prosperity itself and its representation in fashion. The aesthetics of fashion should take prosperity into account: this can be verified phenomenologically since fashion reflects the spirit of the brand and, therefore, of the designers. Consequently, aesthetics, too, plays an active role in putting forward an idea of prosperity. The epistemological nexus that allows us to think about the aesthetics of prosperity and, consequently, about a new meaning for prosperity in fashion is all in the fact that fashionable clothing and indeed fashion itself are the aesthetic epiphenomena of the current economic and financial systems. Fashion – which has always shown a predilection for luxury, both with genuine brands and knock-offs imitating luxury merchandise – mostly looks at prosperity as the luxury of quantity and quality and systematically ignores other kinds of prosperity, including that of sobriety. Indeed, sobriety is considered to be the direct opposite of luxury, of the magnificence emanating from fashion.

In order to prove that the aesthetics of fashion can communicate a new sense of prosperity, that is, sobriety, the causal relationship of this assumption must be made even more explicit. From a philosophical perspective, this relationship is founded on the fact that connects the surface – that is, the appearances – to the essence – that

is, the nature – of a phenomenon. The aesthetics of fashion and luxury, these worldly phenomena (phenomenology) of being in the world (existentialism), are the epiphenomena of modern philosophy and economy and, as such, communicate their essence. That is, appearances are not and cannot be anything but the epiphenomena of a world view and of an economy. This is so true that, even when big brands of fashion try to offer a collection conveying a sense of cultural, social, and political resistance, or a desire for sobriety and minimalism, the means through which this is expressed always understand prosperity as luxury, that is, as everything that is not essential.

From an economic point of view, though Sombart interpreted luxury as the cause for the establishment of capitalism itself, the most credited opinion sees fashion and luxury as the consequences of the new economic system, that is, capitalism. In either case, fashion is strongly connected with the development of the economic system, whether as its cause or as its effect, even though fashion studies have relativised and deconstructed the link between the origin of fashion and the establishment of Western modernity. Whether following one interpretation or the other, fashion nevertheless carries within itself the spirit of capitalism and its ethos, and concerns economic prosperity since its very origins and to the present day.

Now, an aesthetics of fashion wishing to overcome the link between a capitalistic economy and economic prosperity understood exclusively as growth must be able to embody the sense of change that only a revolution is capable of producing. Here, revolution must be understood as a *re-volution*, a new cycle: that is, fashion must be able, or should be able, to revolutionise its aesthetics not only in its more superficial appearances but so as to express a truth on an ongoing change in the economic system and its sincerity.

Producing without any worry for the protection of the environment, on the one hand, and for social justice, on the other, and offering clothing that only on the surface, in the appearances, expresses something else, that is, a new sense of prosperity, is an endeavour destined to fail. Fashion needs what, in my contribution *Per una morale contemporanea* (Ambrosio, 2024), I call a 'true conversion', and not just a restyling. At times, this conversion might seem to take the form of the myriad 'green-washing' marketing campaigns launched by one brand or another. One such

example could be LVMH's campaign from 2018 to reduce the carbon footprint of their shops and boutiques by changing their practices relating to internal lighting. Though the brand's intention is worthy, this is a 'conversion' that is likely to have very little concrete impact since it does not deal in any way with the practical environmental impacts of the fashion industry on a worldwide scale. However, 'conversions' can be partial and superficial but can also reach much deeper, as is the case for newly established ethical brands that use innovative materials respectful of people and the environment. In 2021, Kering, another giant of luxury, launched a powerful campaign to announce that it would stop using animal furs altogether, thus starting a new trend combining ethics and aesthetics in haute couture and the luxury industry. This latter example can be considered a true 'conversion' and is likely to also have a significant impact on consumers and their acceptance of new trends. Fashion indeed expresses a strong drive within the system of the contemporary. Agamben (2018) finds in fashion the most accomplished example of the device of 'contemporaneity', indeed because it best represents the idea of a perpetual search for instantness within the flow of time, thus creating with every novelty an effect of outdatedness. This chase after novelty, which creates the conditions for a never-ending consumption, fixes the idea of the fleeting, thus making fashion the sister of death, as Giacomo Leopardi had already called it in his dialogue from 1829 included in *Small Moral Works*. The fact that fashion always offers a sense of prosperity is confirmed by the current report *The State of Fashion* by McKinsey & Company. Despite a more or less swinging trend in 2023, the report does not hesitate to say that: 'As a whole, the fashion industry is predicted to achieve year-on-year retail sales growth of between 2 percent and 4 percent in 2024' (2023, p. 10). Despite the big brands of fashion and luxury inviting the industry to return to sobriety during the pandemic, the system of fashion communicates, in practice, a will to grow economically, and quantitatively and qualitatively, with a wish for a creative renewal of forms as well as materials. Now, the prosperity of fashion and its aesthetics are embodied, to use a term with a strong Christian theological connotation, in the myth of growth (Latouche, 2010), which entails the influence of limitless progress (Latouche, 2004). The aesthetics of fashionable clothing and haute couture specifically conveys values of

prosperity founded on the parameters of luxury, that is, as defined by Sombart, of quantitative or qualitative excess:

Quantitative luxury is synonymous with prodigality; such as the keeping of a hundred servants when one would do, or the simultaneous striking of three matches to light one cigar, etc. Qualitative luxury is the use of goods of superior quality. These two types can be, and in most cases are, combined. (Sombart, 1967, p. 59).

However, if prosperity is understood instead as a notion that is also ethical and even religious, that is, as a sense of divine blessing and, more importantly, as a responsibility, then aesthetics too can contribute to its reformation, that is, to the conversion of the system.

CONCLUSION: A PATH TOWARDS "PROSPERITY FASHION"

If the previous argument is cogent enough, it is impossible to think that fashion with all of its actors, from the designers to the marketing teams and through all the chains of production and post-production, cannot be founded on an ethics that is at the same time of entrepreneurship, social justice, stewardship of the environment, and finally transparency towards the consumer: only an ethical intervention can save fashion from the financial bubble it entered after the Second World War and over the decades following the economic boom, that is, from the Eighties.

If on the one hand it is impossible to imagine a moralisation of fashion along the lines of ethical operations from bygone times, yet it is not impossible to envisage attributing to fashion a real ethical mission. Since fashion defines itself, in its own founding principles, as the bringer of novelty and the interpreter of the spirit of the time (Vinken, 2005), then the spirit of the current time is ready to reconsider the meaning of prosperity.

Neo-liberal capitalistic economies are founded on the idea of never-ending growth, but a new meaning can rise from prosperity if this is understood as happiness. Such operation entails that the meaning of prosperity must go back to the terms offered by philosophical and religious ethics. The fear of a return to moralism is connected to an understanding of the latter that derives from areas now independent of any sense of moral or religious law. But other areas can take inspiration from true

elements of ethical and religious traditions that, at any rate, have already been at work in the development of that very same spirit that prevailed in capitalism.

True prosperity means happiness, and this should not be understood as a purely irenic consideration but as an exercise of the virtues elaborated by theologians and philosophers from antiquity to the modern day. True prosperity, a notion that must be understood as a sense of happiness, is possible only if human virtues are exercised. These virtues, which can also take on a religious meaning, are deeply rooted in human ethics. The prosperity that fashion can offer is that of a happiness founded on the exercise of several virtues: not only the accumulation of capital and the yearly growth of earnings and profits, coupled with head-spinning dividends, but also human ethics in all the scopes of justice, whether social, climatic, or aesthetic.

The seventeenth-century financial bubble around the trade of the most refined and most ephemeral flower on earth – that is, the tulip (Dash, 2010) – is a very thought-provoking example that can be quite relevant also for fashion, which is built on clothing that is always changing and thus is ephemeral. More recently, other, more essential sectors of the economy have demonstrated that the financial bubble does not ignore any industry. Thus, in order to counter financial crises, fashion and luxury – which, as already mentioned, are already starting to show slight signs of suffering – must be ethical, that is, they must exercise virtues in all their capacities in order to become a path to true prosperity, that is, to happiness.

Fashion can and must offer happiness as a possibility for exercising human and social virtues. The word virtue in itself is linked to the notion of *habitus*, in its Latin and Scholastic meaning, that is, the ability to repeat a good action in order to generate virtue. So, it is not by chance that *habitus* refers both to a good habit and the clothing that one wears. And just like a habit, which is an item of clothing donned forever, virtue too is part of human behaviours.

From a contemporary and sociological perspective, Pierre Bourdieu has recently brought such a classic field of ethics back into focus, interpreting the notion of *habitus* both as a social practice and as cultural capital, or rather as an embodiment of that cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2016). By bringing together embodied cultural

capital – the *habitus* – and the other dimension of the *habitus* itself, that is, social behaviours, Bourdieu's reflection allows us to introduce the idea of a 'prosperity fashion' capable of spreading new trends and hermeneutics when it comes to prosperity itself. Thus, the *habitus* as discussed by Bourdieu turns into an extremely important tool that connects political power, social behaviours, and cultural capital. In this context, cultural capital is understood as the aesthetics of fashion – that is, the power of style – with brands both large and small playing an important role in the diffusion of an idea or trend such as that of prosperity.

Though this reflection might perhaps sound a bit utopian, it is not so when one takes into account all the financial crises of many sectors that used to be considered to be necessarily far removed from ethics since they are shrouded in the shadow of human greed. Fashion must either be able to exercise the entire outfit of human and social virtues for the protection of workers, artists, and resources, or it is destined for an apocalypse with no return. In this sense, fashion as a system can be compared to a religion, that is, a system of beliefs as well as ethical references capable of transforming the individual and the society (Ambrosio, 2022).

Thus, the aesthetics of fashion must be able to convey this inner transformation of all the sectors of creation, from production to marketing, lest the ultimate judgement is that of a missed opportunity for true prosperity. It is not enough to legislate to make enterprises virtuous: there is a need for ethical responsibility – an almost tautological notion – that might allow all those who operate or have an interest in fashion to work towards the genuine creation of the conditions for happiness.

REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. (2018). *Che cos'è un dispositivo?* Milano: Nottetempo.
- Ambrosio, A. F. (2024). *Per una morale contemporanea. Critica della moda pura*. Milano: Mimesis.
- Ambrosio, A. F. (2022). *Moda e religioni. Vestire il sacro, sacralizzare il look*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori.
- Barile, N. (2011). *Sistema moda. Oggetti, strategie e simboli: dall'iperlusso alla società low cost*. Milano: Egea.
- Barthes, R. (1983). *Fashion System*. English transl. by M. Ward and R. Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bourdieu, P. (2016). *Sociologie générale: Cours au Collège de France (1983-1986)*, vol. 2, Paris: Edition du Seuil/Raisons d'agir.
- Dash, M. (2010). *Tulipomania: The Story of the World's Most Coveted Flower & the Extraordinary Passions It Aroused*. New York: Crown/Archetype.
- Latouche, S. (2010). *Le pari de la décroissance: Penser et*

consommer autrement pour une révolution culturelle. Paris: Pluriel.

Latouche, S. (2004). *La mégamachine: Raison technoscientifique, raison économique et mythe du progrès ; essais à la mémoire de Jacques Ellul*. Paris: Ed. La Découverte.

Masci, F. (2023). *Hors mode*. Paris: Allia.

McKinsey & Company. (2024). *The state of fashion 2024: Finding growth niches in an uncertain climate. The Business of Fashion*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/state-of-fashion-2024>

Moore, H. L., Davies, M., Mintchev, N., & Woodcraft, S. (Eds.). (2023). *Prosperity in the Twenty-First Century: Concepts, models and metrics*. London: UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv33pb01p>

Simmel, G. (1957). *Fashion*. *American Journal of Sociology*, 62(6), 541-58.

Simmel, G. (1905). *Philosophie der Mode*. *Moderne Zeitfragen*, 11, 5-41.

Sombart, W. (1967). *Capitalism and Luxury*. English transl. by W. R. Dittmar. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Spadaro, A. and M. Figueroa (2017). *Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism in the USA: A Surprising Ecumenism*. *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 4010, 105-13.

Veblen, Th. (1899), *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: The MacMillan Company.

Vignoli, M., Roversi, S., Jatwani, C., Tiriduzzi, M. (2021) *Human and Planet Centered Approach: Prosperity Thinking in Action*. In *Proceedings of the International Conference on Engineering Design (ICED21)*, Gothenburg, Sweden, 16-20 August 2021.

Vinken, B. (2005). *Fashion Zeitgeist: Trends and Cycles in the Fashion System*. Oxford: Berg. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780857854094>

Weber, M. (2000). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. English transl. by Talcott Parsons. London/New York: Routledge.