

OPINION

THONG POLITICS

The history of shortsighted laws to control young people's underpants.

By Jill Fields

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Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poem, "Underwear," begins, "I didn't get much sleep last night thinking about underwear." The recent statutes outlawing public display of undergarments passed by several Louisiana towns (and being considered in Georgia, New Jersey and Connecticut) show that Ferlinghetti is not alone.

City officials are especially concerned about young men whose sagging trousers expose their boxers because, the lawmakers claim, the style originated in prison, where belts are not permitted. The ACLU opposes such laws as violations of the 1st Amendment; others object because the laws tend to single out young black men, a group already subjected to considerable cultural suspicion and state scrutiny; and still others think dress codes are just plain silly and unenforceable.

Whether or not those who wear sagging pants are celebrating crime and headed for trouble, one thing is certain: American teenagers love to bug their elders, and clothing has long been a great way to do that. State attempts to control who wears what also have a long history. Kings issued edicts to prevent the rising bourgeoisie from wearing the silks and furs only those of noble birth previously had the wealth to display. (We all know how that turned out.)

In the 19th century, laws against cross-dressing spread across the United States, as did rules prescribing dress at workplaces and schools. Some mayors in the early 20th century tried to prohibit women's sports "knickerbockers" in public. And it was only in 1993 that California prohibited employers from requiring female workers to wear dresses. Recent images of Iranian fashion police humiliating men wearing jeans and T-shirts and hounding women deemed inappropriately dressed is chilling evidence that state regulation of dress remains a means of social control.

Despite strait-laced regulations, underwear as outerwear began well before Madonna made the display of a bra strap de rigueur rather than dreaded. In the supposedly sexually-repressed Victorian era, women could not avoid—and some surely enjoyed—displaying their ruffled drawers under their swaying hoop skirts. Similarly, the rustling of silk petticoats was an everyday, yet suggestive, event. In the 1920s, lingerie scenes in movies became commonplace. Joan Crawford in 1928's "Our Dancing Daughters" went further, ripping off her skirt to dance more freely in the "step-ins"—underpants similar to today's shorts—she wore beneath her flapper fringe. In the 1930s, body-hugging bias slips were often indistinguishable from the slinky dresses worn with or, as in Jean Harlow's case, without them.

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

As consumer culture took off, bold ads and retail displays put underwear on to newspaper pages and into shop windows. We also “see” underwear on a daily basis even if worn in ways that wouldn’t trigger arrest and fine in Louisiana: lace-trimmed camisoles, corset tops and the unavoidable thong. And in some cases, even what you don’t see directly, you’re well aware is there: Consider for example push-up bras or the infamous visible panty line. In this light, the recent anti-underwear statutes do appear discriminatory.

Several decades ago, my leggy teenage sister wore “hot pants” to Friday night services at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino. A congregant complained. Rabbi Harold Schulweis later told us he replied, “You should look into her eyes, not at what she’s wearing.”

Those who support criminalizing fashion need to face the more challenging job of looking into the eyes of young people and dealing with the real problems the debates about these fashions raise: the sweatshops where they are made, the educational and career opportunities of the young men who wear them and the conditions in prisons where the style supposedly originated.

Sagging pants are a goofy American fad; the problems they represent aren’t. Officials should stop trying to pull up young men’s pants and take time to listen up to this youthful fashion statement.

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