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**KEYNOTE PRESENTATION**

**| Keynote by Dr. Richard Thompson Ford**

**| *Institute of Engaged Leadership* in Washington, D.C.**

**| Sunday 15 March 2020**

**Dress codes: crimes of fashion and laws of attire**

In this keynote, Dr. Richard Ford will give us a sneak preview of his next book, in which he explores what dress codes tell us about the significance of clothing – our most conspicuous medium of self-expression – and its relationship to power relations in society, community cohesiveness and social order.

Dress codes may seem a bit old fashioned, but in fact we are constantly told who should wear what and when[[1]](#footnote-1). Rules—written and implied—divide formal from casual attire and children’s clothing from that of adults. There are rules about the right attire for different times of the day and different social occasions. And, of course, there are rules about the types of clothing men may wear and about the clothing suitable for women, although gendered norms in clothing have tended to weaken in recent decades. Some dress codes are job requirements or house rules of an organization or establishment and flouting them can get one fired or kicked out of school, for instance. Numerous judicial cases of alleged employment discrimination based on gender, race or religion also arose in relation to a dress code or grooming code[[2]](#footnote-2); for instance, an employer forbidding a hairstyle commonly worn by African American such as dredlocks , or an employer requiring female employees to wear high-heeled shoes.

Other disputes about the way people dress are framed in terms of cultural appropriation, whereby members of a social group adopt, in a manner deemed inappropriate, an attire that is part of the customs or culture of another group, which is often a more marginalized group. Such cultural borrowing has been increasingly criticized since the turn of the millennium.

Dress codes and uproar around unconventional uses of dress have a long history. In Europe, laws regulating attire started to proliferate around the 1300s. They restricted certain attires to the elite, prohibiting people who did not have that status to dress like the elite. From the late Middle Ages to today, the proliferation and the intensity with which dress codes were enforced seem to be correspond to moments of social upheaval, when people were not sure anymore where they stood in some form of social ordering.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Today, we live in a context where we have social upheavals in various ways and social roles are unsettled, particularly those involving sex and gender. This may generate more disputes around dress codes, because part of the latter’s function is to communicate predictable meaning, allowing people to understand the world around them and ensuring that a particular type of attire has the meaning it is expected to have. But increasingly in our society, clothing is being worn in a range of ways, notably in resistance to some garments’ conventional meaning. Although our society is increasingly casual, at the same time there seems to be increasing anxiety about self-presentation and what people are communicating through their clothing when we encounter them.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Questions**

1. Why do we tend to treat differently gender fluidity and race fluidity in clothing? In Western societies, gender norms in clothing have been increasingly challenged or relaxed but cultural borrowing across racial groups (e.g. a white woman wearing dredlocks) has raised increasing criticisms in recent years. Why is it so?
2. In what circumstances is it acceptable for a sociocultural group to adopt the clothing or grooming practices of another sociocultural group? Why couldn’t superordinate groups adopt marginalized groups’ clothing practices, while we tend to accept the reverse practice?
3. Beyond the area of clothing, isn’t cultural borrowing inevitable in social life? What would the world look like without cultural borrowing?
4. Are clothes as important as before as signifiers of social status and other meaning? How can we describe the modern “power dressing”?

**Keynote Speaker**

**Dr.** **Richard Thompson Ford**

Richard Thompson Ford is the George E. Osborne Professor of Law at Stanford Law School. He has practiced law with the firm of Morrison & Foerster, served as a Commissioner of the San Francisco Housing Authority and worked as a policy consultant for the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, the City and County of San Francisco, California and the County of San Mateo, California.

He writes for both scholarly and popular audiences in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Boston Globe, the San Francisco Chronicle, The Christian Science Monitor, Esquire.com and Slate, where has been a regular contributor on legal affairs, as well in the Harvard Law Review, the Stanford Law Review and the Yale Law Journal.

He has written several books, including two selected as Notable Books of the year by the New York Times: *The Race Card: how bluffing about bias makes race relations worse* which The New York Times Sunday Book Review selected as one of the 100 Notable Books of 2008 and *Rights Gone Wrong: how law corrupts the struggle for equality*, which The New York Times selected as one of the 100 Notable Books of 2011. In 2012, ON BEING A BLACK LAWYER (OBABL) selected him as one of the 100 Most Influential Black Lawyers in the United States.

He has appeared on several television and radio programs including The Colbert Report, the Rachel Maddow Show and the Dylan Rattigan Show.

1. Source for this paragraph: Richard T. Ford, *Dress codes*, <http://richardtford.law.stanford.edu/dress-codes/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard T. Ford, 2018, *Faculty on Point: Professor Richard Thompson Ford on Dress Codes*, <https://law.stanford.edu/directory/richard-thompson-ford/#slsnav-featured-video>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Idem [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Idem [↑](#footnote-ref-4)