

The fashion police

IT all started just before Christmas when an armed police officer barred my spouse, a 40-year-old sociology professor, from leaving the Regal Elmwood Theater. If she wanted to continue walking the 10 yards to the exit door, the officer informed her, she would have to pull down her hood until she was outside. Or she could be arrested. Of course the pulling down the hood part goes against everything our mothers taught us about winter attire – that we put on our mittens and hoods before we go out into the cold. But the man giving the order had a gun and represented the power of the state.

While the Regal's apparent dress code might not seem like a big deal, it is. Random intrusions of authority imposing arbitrary laws upon us is the essence of a police state. So I sent the following missive to Michael Campbell, the CEO of Regal:

For the record, your dress policy, if it is one, seems strange. There is no visible signage in the ticket area alerting customers to a dress code (nor does it ask them to acquiesce to a waiver of their civil rights). Furthermore, your advertising and your recorded telephone messages fail to state such a policy. Your ticket stubs also fail to address this and any other arbitrary policies we may not be aware of. We were only informed of this policy as we were leaving after watching a movie. Had we known about this policy earlier, we would have had the choice to not patronize a Regal Theater. Especially odd is the fact that we were informed of this policy as we were leaving, and that our exit was barred by an armed employee while we were questioned in an intimidating manner about our understanding of your policy – a

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policy we clearly don't understand. Did I mention that it is cold here in Buffalo?

Can you please explain this policy and also explain exactly what we experienced last night, and if any measures are being taken to insure that other people, including possibly more vulnerable populations, are not subject to similar treatment. Other theaters in our community offer family-friendly environments where diverse groups of patrons are not accosted based on their dress or any other factors of their appearance. I would like more information about your dress policy and how it is advertised and applied, since it is in the application of this policy that Regal Theaters seems to be departing from the family-friendly norms set by other area theaters.

The response I got was a call from a Regal corporate public relations wonk in Tennessee as well as a call from Regal's regional manager in Buffalo. Their story goes like this: There is no Regal policy imposing a dress code or otherwise banning hoodies. The corporation, they explained, contracted with a lone Buffalo police officer to supply uniformed off-duty cops – equipped with borrowed police cars – to run their security. The officers, according to the official Regal line, must have imposed their own dress code on unsuspecting patrons – just another case of cops run amok. Regal, they assured me, would reign them in. The cops, they surmised, were just being overzealous in “thwarting gang activity” at Regal theaters.

“Is there gang activity at the Regal theaters?” I asked.

“No,” they told me. That is, no, except for the anti-hoodie posse.

Now I don't normally patronize the Regal theaters since I prefer to support the locally owned and operated Dipson chain, but I made a point to check out the Regal Elmwood recently to see just how tranquillo things were. So I put on my gang colors, a Buff State hooded sweatshirt, and went off to the cinema. When I tried to enter, after buying my ticket, a Buffalo police officer politely explained to me that he was ordered by Regal management to maintain a dress code barring hoodies. Hmmm? So I spoke to the manager. Sure enough, can you believe it? A corporate PR wonk had lied to me. The orders come down from Tennessee. No hooded sweatshirts – but only, it seems, at the Regal Elmwood. And it wasn't cops gone crazy as I was led to believe. It was the white boys at Regal's corporate H.Q. in Tennessee who had gone amok, passing the bad rap, this time undeserved, onto Buffalo's finest.

When I confronted the manager with the fact that I was a journalist and I had interviewed his superiors, who assured me there was no such policy, he looked at me and said, “You can wear a hoodie.” He then ordered another off-duty police officer to escort me past his confused partner and into the theater.

So, it seems the policy goes like this: You can't wear a hooded sweatshirt at the Regal Entertainment Camp unless you are a journalist or are in the company of a journalist.

Of course the whole policy smacks of racism. The good ol' boys at Regal entertainment can't quite bar black youth from their theaters, so they do the next best thing, and ban attire common to black youth – and enforce the policy exclusively at the only local Regal patronized by black youth. Over the past few weeks I spoke with employees and patrons at suburban Regals who assured me that no such ban exists at any other local Regal theater.

But hoodphobia isn't just a Regal phenomenon. I was recently contacted by a black college student who was barred from Tops Supermarkets after an off-duty police officer ordered him to remove his hood. He asked why he had to remove it and was immediately banished from ever returning to Tops. The African-American police officer told the student that he was lucky – a white officer would have had him pinned to the ground and cuffed for "talking smart."

I'm sorry, but I just don't see this kind of thing happening to white kids wearing their hooded high school sweatshirts to their local neighborhood supermarkets in the 'burbs.

As it turns out this weirdness isn't confined to Tops and Regal. Last Sunday, the Buffalo News' Lou Michel wrote a story that ran under the headline, "Citizen's Learn Tips to Spot Terrorists." Above the headline was a photo of a group of Buffalo auxiliary police officers learning to spot terrorists. Michel, demonstrating no more critical thinking skills than an army ant, unquestionably echoes the anti-terrorism "expert" in explaining that "it's the little things that count in determining if someone is up to no good." He goes on to list three bullet points for spotting terrorists. They'll buy "bulk amounts of fertilizer," they'll take photos of "buildings and locations in the area" and they'll wear "oversized coats and hooded sweatshirts on warm days."

"Alert action," Michel goes on, could prevent "untold problems" such as the detonation of "a small nuclear device."

Geez! No wonder they've gone apeshit at the Regal. It's all part of the war on terror. So it should come as no surprise that Tony Blair – yes, that Tony Blair, Bush's lapdog – has gotten into the act. According the British tabloid, The Mirror, Blair weighed in on an emerging trend in the UK to ban hooded attire in British shopping malls. The Mirror reports that youths wear hoodies and, egads, baseball caps, to hide their faces from the big brotheresque surveillance cameras that dot the UK's public spaces.

So let's get this straight. Do these morons truly think that this is how to protect us from international terror– to ban warm clothing? It's wonderful to know there are such great thinkers looking out for us.

A quick news search also popped up a third hotspot for hoodie stories: Regal's home state of Tennessee. It seems Knoxville's residents are now being admonished to call the police and report spottings of young people in hoodies. Tennessee filmmaker Molly Secours, writing for the Tennessee Independent Media Center, quotes African-American community leaders as expressing concern that actions like the hoodie ban constitute racial profiling and are more about "changing the face of the community" than about combating crime – or in Lou Michel's world, terrorism. "As fashions change," she writes, "so will the criminal profile, but what will remain consistent is the color of skin suspected underneath the clothing."

Racist, anti-terrorist or whatever, Buffalo has just emerged on the international anti-hoodie radar. Lou Michel's silly story, it seems, has been picked up, with or without permission, and distributed worldwide by the Reverend Sung Myung Moon's Unification Church-owned news service. Twenty-four hours after Michel's story hit the pavement in Buffalo, it was also picked up by the British press, complete with a Buffalo, New York tagline. We're now a global hotspot for hoodophobia. Thanks to Lou Michel, Buffalo is once again a laughingstock.

Whether this is a story about racism or one about just plain stupidity, one thing is certain: It is a story about an emerging police state where rules are arbitrarily formed and enforced just for the sake of exercising authority and control over a subdued population. There truly are fashion police in this brave new world.

Stay tuned for Weird Corporate Behavior (Part Two) when Dr. Niman reports on Chuck E. Cheese on the front lines in Iraq and Don Pablo's stratospheric margarita prices.