

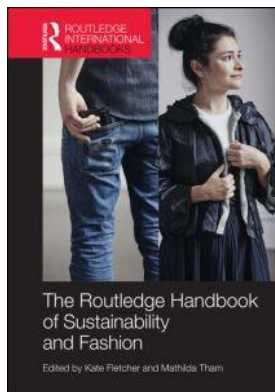
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2

SUSTAINABILITY AND FASHION

Joanne Entwistle

Introduction

In this chapter, I want to examine some of the ways in which fashion has been analysed and criticised within the social sciences, particularly from my own discipline, sociology, and explore what connections we might make between fashion and sustainability that have not been fully addressed within this literature. What I suggest is that much critical analysis of fashion from social science scholars, from the late nineteenth century onwards, chimes with contemporary sustainability debates and criticisms, even though the term sustainability isn't used in this early literature. Broadly speaking, the association with femininity has done much to diminish and discredit fashion, with early tendencies to see fashion as immoral and not worthy of intellectual analysis. This classic literature has been challenged more recently with the growth of fashion studies in Europe and North America. This literature is summarised in the first part of the chapter. In the second part of the chapter, I want to consider how we might bring fashion and sustainability together for a more comprehensive analysis. I argue that we need to find new and innovative ways to examine these in a more integrated way and argue for an actor–network–theory (ANT) approach.

Part I: fashion research within the social sciences

Although it has often been marginalised and considered 'trivial' or irrelevant, fashion has a long history within the social sciences, drawing the attention of sociologists, psychologists and cultural studies theorists in particular (see, for example, Flugel, 1930; Veblen 1953 [1899]; Simmel, 1950, 1971; Wilson and Taylor, 1989; Entwistle, 2000; Entwistle and Wilson, 2001; Wilson, 2003). The low status of fashion, vis-à-vis other more supposedly 'serious' topics, has, to some extent, changed more recently with a growing recognition of fashion's multi-million-pound significance as a major cultural industry and employer (Pratt, 2004, 2008). Sustainability, on the other hand, has received relatively little attention by social scientists, and the connections between fashion and sustainability have not been fully explored, despite the fact that fashion's sustainability (or not) is now a hot topic within mainstream media and a major issue more broadly, as I argue below.

When reviewing the now vast and constantly expanding literature on fashion, it is apparent that the social meanings and practices around modern fashionable dress are key concerns. Much

of this literature is concerned with questions of identity, examined from the point of view of gender (Veblen, 1953 [1899]), 'race' and ethnicity (Kondo, 1997; Kawamura, 2004), class identity (Veblen, 1953 [1899]; Simmel, 1971; Cohen, 1972; Hall and Jefferson, 1976), sexuality (Lewis and Rolley, 1997; Geczy and Karaminas, 2013) and religion (Lewis, 2013). The association with gender has perhaps the longest pedigree within the literature, with fashion associated more closely with women. This is historically inaccurate, as aristocratic men and women were both engaged in fashion in the early years of its development. That said, by the nineteenth century, a close association of femininity with fashion was firmly established, along with the idea of 'separate spheres' – men in the world of production and work, and women in the world of consumption and the home. In addition, the idea of a 'great masculine renunciation' of finery in dress was widely accepted among scholars (Flugel, 1930; Kutcha, 2002), although it has since been challenged as too simplistic (Wilson, 2003; Shannon, 2006).

What does this concern with gender have to do with issues of sustainability? We can begin to answer this question by dividing it into two branches of literature, one that is focused on production and the other concerned with consumption, and examine the ways in which femininity has been closely associated with fashion on both sides of this equation.

Taking production first, it is a simple fact that fashionable dress has, historically, been produced by female seamstresses, sitting at an individual sewing machine. This work has, notoriously, been conducted under harsh 'sweated' conditions: long hours in hot, dangerous, poorly regulated factories for low pay (see also Chapter 21). Even when not produced in factories, home-working seamstresses are also poorly paid and have to work long hours (Phizacklea, 1990). These production characteristics have long been a source of concern and condemnation and closely associated questions of sustainability today. Thus, Karl Marx's critique of capitalism (1976) attended to the problems of both the textile industry and the sweated labour conditions in factories producing garments (see Harris, 2005, for a fuller discussion of nineteenth-century needlewomen).

As production of garments, alongside many other products, now happens across vast global distance, in search of the cheapest labour, more recent, Marxist-inspired literature has focused attention on global commodity chains, or GCCs, which emphasise the connections within any commodity system, linking up all parts of production across the chain – what is referred to as a 'vertical' chain. Commodity chain analysis traces the entire trajectory of the product within a political economy of development perspective (Hughes and Reimer, 2004; Raghuram, 2004), and there are broadly two approaches – world systems theory and systems of provision.

Taking the former first, 'world systems theory' (Wallerstein, 1974; Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986; Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994; Gereffi 1994, 1999) has its roots in Marxist theory and aims to trace the connections between production in 'peripheral' regions (where there is cheap labour) to 'core' or Western retail and consumption areas. Here we have arrived at one of the heartland issues of sustainability: working pay and conditions and the human toll that Western appetites for shiny new consumer goods, such as cheap fashions, takes on the workers who toil to produce. Much as fashion was a driver of industrialisation in the nineteenth century in countries such as Britain, it is now a driver of development in the countries located in the global South and East. And, just as with nineteenth-century industrialisation, it is women, predominantly, who bear the brunt of the harsh industrial systems of production. Thus, whereas, in the nineteenth century when Marx was writing, the workforce being exploited for its labour in the cramped and unhealthy environment of the sweatshop was formed of home-grown women and children, today's sweated labour is much further away. Indeed, this has been part of the problem. The rise of 'fast fashion' – cheap fashion garments in large retail chains – has brought with it a need to find ever cheaper labour, as the workforce at home became too expensive. This sourcing of

labour abroad, in factories of India and Bangladesh and in newly capitalist countries such as Poland, not only makes for a longer supply chain, often with subcontractors pushing the responsibility and duty of care for workers' health and well-being further away, it has also meant a greater distance between Western consumers and the Eastern and Southern producers, putting it 'out of sight, out of mind'. What academic writing and global activism since the 1990s have done (Ross, 1997; Klein, 2000) is bring this murky production out into the light, forcing many of the bigger brands such as Nike and Gap to alter their relationships to subcontractors. However, wave after wave of scandal continues to put labour practices in the spotlight, as when a fire in a Bangladeshi factory hit the headlines in 2013. These awful stories provide moments in which to reflect on the harsh working environment that feeds the Western fashion system, although fashion is by no means the only problematic industry.

Although commodity chain approaches examine vertical relationships between production and consumption and are sensitive to the power dynamics between 'core' and 'peripheral' nations, it is not exclusively linear relations we need to consider when trying to understand the relationships within any system of production. Some of the literature within sociology and geography has argued that we should also consider the 'horizontal' features, which might relate different commodity chains (Leslie and Reimer, 1999; Hughes and Reimer, 2004). Indeed, Leslie and Reimer (1999: 407) ask, 'Is there a vertical uniqueness to individual commodity chains? Does a vertical approach neglect the interconnections between different systems of provision?' Some workers in fashion might have more in common with workers in other design/aesthetic production – say in furniture design – than they do with other workers in the same industry, further along the chain. For example, a fashion buyer in London probably has more in common with an urban-based architect or interior designer than they do with workers in India who make the clothes they buy. This point about horizontal connections may also caution us from seeing fashion as the only industry with labour practice problems: in the IT industry, workers in India producing iPads and smartphones have been shown to endure similarly bad working conditions and poor labour practices as workers in the fashion industry. We might ask why it is that fashion is often singled out for more condemnation, as against other manufactured goods: could it be something to do with the lingering suspicion that fashion is more 'trivial', that somehow consumption of fashionable dress is more problematic and immoral than consumption of the obligatory smartphone or tablet? Is there a lingering gendered prejudice at work here? (See also Chapter 28.)

Another form of commodity chain analysis is the systems of provision (SOPS) approach, which traces the 'vertical' connections between production and consumption, but, whereas GCC tends to move linearly from production to consumption, SOPS tends to see a more dialectical relationship between production and consumption that recognises the cultural significance of commodities and acknowledges the important dynamics between production and consumption (Hughes and Reimer, 2004). A SOPS approach to fashion has been most fully examined by Fine and Leopold (Leopold, 1992; Fine and Leopold, 1993; Fine, 1995). Their 'systems' approach takes into account the importance of consumers in determining some of what appear as commodities within any system and also recognises the critical importance of distribution systems and 'middlemen' (*sic*) as 'linchpins' within systems of provision.

What does all this focus on 'systems' and 'commodity chains' tell us about the ways in which fashion has been thought about and how we might connect it up to concerns about sustainability? For one thing, this way of approaching fashion focuses attention on the importance of thinking about the entire fashion cycle, from production through to distribution, retail and consumption. Production is only one side of the story: a second body of literature has dealt with the relationships between gender and consumption.

Indeed, the literature on gender and consumption is extensive. From cultural histories (Vickery, 1993; de Grazia and Furlough, 1996; Jones, 1996, 2014) to contemporary accounts of women's relationship with dress (Entwistle, 1997, 2001; Woodward, 2007), we find there is a concern with the gendered identity of fashion consumers. Fashion has long been criticised as a cruel, exploitative industry, one that is oppressive to women in particular, as it is women who, in the eyes of some social and cultural theorists, are 'victims' of the (supposedly) 'frivolous' and 'ridiculous' pendulum swings of fashion. This line of criticism dates far back through the centuries, but, by the nineteenth century, it sparked a number of dress reform movements that attempted to eradicate fashion and introduce a new, more 'rational' and 'healthy' system of dress (see Newton, 1974, for a fuller discussion).

One academic associated with this critical stance towards fashion is Thorstein Veblen (1953 [1899]). For Veblen, writing at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States, it was the fashions of the *nouveau riche* that were a problem and that he criticised for their 'irrational' fashionable dress. In his view, fashion is about class competition, worn by women in the newly emerging urban *petite bourgeoisie* for the vicarious display of the wealth of their husbands. As he sees it, to be 'in fashion', one has to be wealthy enough to follow the incessant pendulum swings of style, which involves discarding garments before they are worn out, something he argued is inherently irrational and wasteful. Further, the fashions themselves display this wealth by being demonstratively constraining – corsets, heavy skirts and so on – suggesting the woman is not able to work and, therefore, further demonstrating the pecuniary strength of the husband.

Although Veblen's analysis was directed at a small social milieu at the turn of the nineteenth century, some of the central tenets of his analysis have had wider application. His view of the fashionable *bourgeoisie* women as the 'chattels' of men seems outdated now, although feminists from the first wave in the early part of the twentieth century through to second-wave feminism in the late twentieth century have also had cause to criticise the seemingly oppressive strictures of the Western fashion system, and there has been a tendency to see women as unwitting 'victims' of fashion, whereas men, on the other hand, are somehow placed above or beyond it. This is, indeed, a simplification of fashion; plenty of scholars (Beward, 1995; Edwards, 1997; Shannon, 2006) have demonstrated male engagement with fashion throughout history, and a whole host of dandies have graced the last few centuries (see, for example, Baudelaire, 1986 [1863]). Further, women are not necessarily unwitting and passive recipients of fashion messages and styles, but active and engaged in their choices and practices of dress, as much contemporary fashion scholarship has demonstrated (Woodward 2007). That said, suspicion permanently hovers over fashion, and there remains a lingering idea that women are 'passive' and easily swayed by fashion: one only has to think about concerns about 'size zero' fashion models and eating disorders to see a similar construction of young women as vulnerable followers of fashion.

Perhaps of continued relevance today is Veblen's basic premise – that fashion is about social competition and emulation – which has retained analytical power, albeit with some degree of scepticism from some theorists (Campbell, 1997). Indeed, Veblen's critique, although challenged by fashion scholars as both historically inaccurate and too simplistic (Wilson, 2003), chimes with some contemporary unease with fashion and the lingering feeling that it is an inherently irrational and wasteful system.

More recently, however, a new 'fashion studies' challenges this simplistic analysis, as well as shifting academic attention to new concerns. One significant area focuses on fashion as a 'creative' industry, examining the nature of production and labour in this sector (McRobbie, 2000; Pratt and Jeffcutt, 2002). Here, there is a concern with the sustainability of careers in the so-called 'creative industries/sector', which depend upon a willingness to identify with 'creative' work

and put up with poor conditions – freelance and contract-based work, low pay, long and irregular working hours (McRobbie, 2002; Mears and Finlay, 2005; Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006). However, we have yet to see a fuller account of fashion and sustainability from within a social science perspective.

Part II: fashion and sustainability – where to now?

Indeed, in contrast to a growing literature on fashion in general, there has been much less written on the issue of sustainability and fashion from a sociological perspective. What literature there is tends to be within business and management studies and is concerned with corporate social responsibility, or CSR (Dickson *et al.*, 2009). Although sociological attention has yet to catch up with these issues, there is, at least, growing recognition of the need to examine fashion and sustainability: for example, the Nordic Fashion Association now brings together designers and academics across the Nordic countries and beyond (with collaborations in the UK as well). In the remaining part of this chapter I focus on how we might develop a more integrated account of fashion and sustainability, deriving from recent work within actor–network theory and practice theory. Both offer ways of connecting up different actors and practices to provide a more integrated approach to the analysis of fashion and sustainability.

Of all the pressing issues with sustainability, the one that perhaps dominates discussion is the environment and the cost of our production and consumption practices on natural resources such as air and water. Indeed, from high water usage in such things as cotton production, to the cost of transporting clothes across vast territories in search of the cheapest labour to stitch knickers (or whatever!), to the problems of our over-consumption of fast fashion and the amount of landfill we create, fashion has been under the spotlight in the popular press in recent years on account of its high environmental costs. This issue is definitely something that warrants attention from social scientists.

One explanation as to why sustainability has only recently come to the attention of traditional social science might be down to the sharp division traditionally drawn between the natural and the social world. Environmental costs have, therefore, been placed on the ‘nature’ side of the division and, as a result, tend to be under-analysed, as sociologists focus on ‘social’ concerns. There are exceptions to this, of course – the work of sociologist Ted Benton (1993) stands out in particular, both for his critiquing this nature/culture division within sociological thought and for putting the environment and ecology on the academic agenda. That said, we have still very few studies that examine sustainability issues alongside fashion.

What perhaps is needed is to think more radically about how we connect up nature and culture, if we are to try to fully map the relationships between our clothing and the surrounding environment. ANT provides some fruitful avenues of enquiry. To understand the radical intervention this approach has made in social science, we need to acknowledge the work of French theorist, Bruno Latour. Latour (1993) challenges our preconceptions about what it is to be ‘modern’, which, he argues, depends upon an artificial distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ that sustains the view of ‘culture’ as superior and active and ‘nature’ as inferior and passive. As he powerfully points out, the objects we label as ‘natural’ are actually products of our particular historical/social ways of seeing and are, therefore, not simple, natural objects, but nature–culture artefacts, or *hybrids*. For example, modern science depends upon various instruments and devices that enable us to ‘see’ things: microscopes that allow us to see bacteria or cells invisible to the naked eye, for example. This has led biology into areas of human ‘culture’ – examining the human genome for example. In this sense, then, nature is no longer seen as merely ‘out there’, separate and different to us, but we are continuous with nature, a part of it, and our apparently ‘social’

world is in fact a hybrid of nature–culture (see Entwistle and Slater, 2013; Entwistle, forthcoming 2015, for fuller discussion). Latour’s approach has helped to open up this dialogue between science and culture, referred to as Science and Technology Studies or STS.

If we follow this logic, something seemingly ‘cultural’ such as fashion is shown to be a hybrid creation, in part ‘natural’, made up of natural materials – such as cotton and water, for example – which are ‘assembled’ (an ANT word) into our ‘social/cultural’ world in complex ways. Thus, we need not see a sharp distinction between the ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ dimensions of fashion at all, but simply examine the continuous flow of materials, objects and actors that make up fashionable dress. Indeed, if we are trying to think more ecologically – that is, see ourselves as part of the Earth’s ecology, not somehow separate or ‘above’ it – then to think about fashion as a nature–culture hybrid is highly beneficial. This way of thinking depends upon a different understanding of the meaning of ‘actor’. For ANT, an ‘actor’ is anything with an ability to act in some capacity; hence, water is an actor, as it is an active component of the materials that make up fashion (and, indeed, just about everything else as well).

ANT provides us with a methodology for ‘tracing’ these connections, by instructing us to closely observe and ‘follow the actors’, in order to see where they go, what they do. If we do this for fashion garments, we might start with fields of cotton in India, or production factories somewhere in Asia, and follow the actors – from the production of textiles to their construction into garments, their distribution to shops and on to consumers, and beyond consumption to disposal and waste. As we follow them, ‘natural’ actors come into contact with ‘cultural’ actors, in complex ‘assemblages’ or hybrids.

This careful attention to materiality and practice evident in STS/ANT has been extended in the work of Shove and others (Shove *et al.*, 2007) to focus attention on design and consumption practices. Shove (2003) examines how everyday objects are utilised in everyday practice, often creatively, and she argues that this feeds into the design of objects. ‘Practice theory’ has tended to examine such things as domestic appliances and everyday technologies – for example, ‘Nordic walking’ (Shove, 2005; see also Pantzar and Shove, 2005) – but there is plenty of scope for extending this way of thinking to fashion consumption, to examine the life cycle of clothes as part of our everyday material culture and look into ways of making our fashion production and consumption more sustainable.

Conclusion

As I have argued in this chapter, there is a long tradition of social science writing on fashion, and we can find within it some themes that touch on issues we now call sustainability. However, we urgently need to think through fashion and sustainability in more sustained and integrated ways if we are to fully understand our relationship to fashionable clothing. I have suggested that ANT and practice theory offer innovative ways of thinking through fashion and sustainability, although the potential of these approaches has yet to be fully applied. They both attend to the importance of materiality and our relationships to objects that enable us to think through fashion as a material practice. Thinking of fashion as a nature–culture hybrid affords us the opportunity to see the continuities between our dress practices and their wider environmental impact. Practice theory attends to the many different ways in which our use of objects feeds back into their design. Brought together, we can use these two approaches to develop a more comprehensive and global account of fashion as not simply about ‘identity’ or ‘meaning’ or ‘consumption’ – those buzz words in many sociological texts on fashion – but as stretched across the entire range of practices, from production to distribution and consumption, and find more productive ways of tying these together.

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