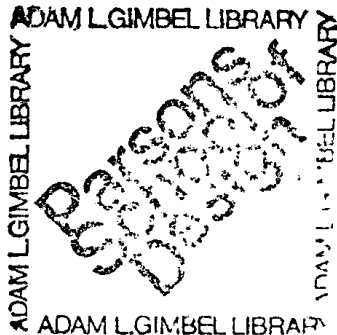


# CHIC

A Fashion  
Reader

# THRILLS

*Edited by Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson*



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For Bill and Pat (JA)  
For Angela and Eleanor (EW)

ELLEN LEOPOLD

# The Manufacture of the Fashion System

## INTRODUCTION

'Fashion' industries are often depicted as being in the grip of forces beyond their control. The notion of an industry that is passively responding to rather than actively creating the conditions which guarantee its survival has made it possible to develop a history of fashion which is entirely demand-led, based on the view that 'it is fashion that makes the industry rather than the industry that makes fashion'.<sup>1</sup> This inherent bias is reflected in a literature which, until recently, consisted on the one hand of straightforward histories of costume and on the other of behavioural theories that address the psychology of fashion and patterns of consumption.<sup>2</sup> Both imply that *consumer demand* is the determining force in the creation of fashion. Totally absent from this tradition is any consideration of the determining role that might be played by clothing production and its history.

Supply-side history, for its part, has focused on the development of labour organisation in the garment industry and on the central role played by a variety of immigrant groups. Though the literature has incorporated demand for clothing, it is viewed primarily as a consequence of the rise of disposable incomes created by factory employment. The specific pattern of demand that has emerged in women's clothing and its role within a unique configuration of distribution and supply, have not been addressed.

In other words, the history of clothing production has made little contribution to an understanding of the 'fashion' system. Loosely defined as the inter-relationship between highly fragmented forms of production and equally diverse and often volatile patterns of demand, the fashion system is a hybrid subject; it incorporates dual concepts of fashion: as a cultural phenomenon, and as an aspect of manufacturing with the accent on production technology. This dual aspect has made it difficult to accommodate within a tradition in which the histories of consumption and production plough largely separate furrows.

A consequence of this division is that the history of fashion has overlooked the slow but sustained development of mass markets for cheap standardised clothing (largely associated with the history of production) and has concentrated instead on the differentiation and diffusion of production emanating from a much narrower segment of the market which, despite its limited scope, has none the less attracted a disproportionate share of media attention. The result has been a tendency to view the history of fashion from the top down, rather than from the bottom up – as the history of haute couture, in other words.

This paper attempts to explain the origins of this extreme contrast in historical traditions by examining the supply-side history of the women's dressmaking industry in the early twentieth century. It interprets the evolution of fashion as a consequence of the specific historical development of a distinct branch of clothing production and as a response to a particular set of constraints on that development. More specifically, it argues that the seemingly anarchic and rapidly changing proliferation of style in women's clothes, a feature that has distinguished it not just from other industries but also from other branches of the clothing industry, has served as a substitute for technical innovation, arising not in response to a rise in incomes or to changes in consumer preferences or to the exhaustion of possibilities arising from early mass production, but rather from the industry's failure ever fully to embrace mass production techniques.

This explanation is offered as a more plausible alternative to those which treat fashion as an emanation from the innate drive of all women to consume. The mutual exclusiveness and incompatibility of these views are succinctly illustrated by the belief that 'categorically, man is always the producer . . . woman the consumer',<sup>3</sup> espoused at a time when four-fifths of the producers of women's apparel were themselves women working in dangerous conditions for extremely low wages. The starkness of the contradiction between the world of high fashion and the sweatshop reveals the weakness of a framework which, in denying any link between consumption and production, dismisses any historical consideration of the class relations which have determined them and their relationship to one another.

#### AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK

Karl Marx predicted that the arrival of the 'decisively revolutionary sewing machine' would, in combination with other progressive forces, help to do away with 'the murderous, meaningless caprices of fashion', while 'the development of ocean navigation and of the means of communication generally' would sweep away the 'technical basis on which seasonal work was really supported'.<sup>4</sup> Over a century later, despite many far-reaching changes in the clothing in-

dustry, both of these brakes on large-scale mass production remain, particularly in branches of the women's apparel industry. This is in itself a good indication of the limited extent to which the revolutionary changes, which transformed other industries and led to the dominance of the Fordist production line, bypassed the clothing industry.

The apparel industry is composed of several wholly separate branches, each with its own pattern of historical development. A distinction has first to be drawn between the development of ready-to-wear and factory-made clothing. The former grew out of bespoke tailoring<sup>5</sup> which allowed for the build up of stock dresses during seasonal periods of slack but which did not imply any changes in the methods, organisation or location of manufacturing. English guild records and stock inventories indicate that making clothes in advance of purchase was well established by the sixteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Factory production, which came later, implies the investment in and co-ordination of labour and machines in a designated workplace for the purpose of increasing the productivity – and profitability – of manufacturing. The earlier spread of many ready-to-wear garments (particularly those which were loose-fitting and simply cut) means that in a limited sense, mass markets preceded mass production.<sup>4</sup>

In the United States, both ready-to-wear and factory-made clothes for men appeared first, at least partly encouraged by demand for clothing for sailors (with only 24-hour turnarounds in port), and by demand for military uniforms at the time of the Civil War. The earlier demand for standardised work clothes (particularly shirts) for men, coinciding with their earlier mass participation in paid labour, also contributed to the earlier development of large-scale markets in some of these goods.

Women's factory-made clothes did not begin to appear until the beginning of the twentieth century, corresponding to (though not entirely the consequence of) their later entry into the labour market. Yet even at the close of the First World War, the industrial development of women's clothing continued to lag behind men's, displaying characteristics increasingly at odds with those conducive to the spread of mass production.

Dressmaking in particular failed to conform to the orthodox pattern. It is also the branch of the clothing industry most closely associated with the evolution of fashion, i.e., with the rise of the role of demand as an active and transforming agent on its own. The link between these two attributes is revealed most clearly in the history of dressmaking in the United States in the decade immediately following the end of the First World War: this is the period commonly cited as triggering off the fashion phenomenon in its twentieth-century mode.<sup>7</sup>

## BEGINNINGS OF INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

The most important distinguishing characteristic of clothing in the twentieth century was its continuing dependence on the individually-operated sewing machine. Introduced in the middle of the nineteenth century, this remained at the core of factory production a century later. The central dynamic at work in most incipient mass production industries, that is, the progressive substitution of the worker to the machine and his or her eventual displacement by large-scale capital equipment, simply did not occur in the clothing industry at a comparable state of development.

The introduction of rigid and interchangeable parts in other industries reduced their dependence on the highly skilled work of the precision engineer.<sup>8</sup> This set the long process of industrial deskilling and technological unemployment in motion. By contrast, the development of machinery in the clothing industry neither displaced labour on the same scale nor stripped it completely of its skills. Such transformation as did occur from the hand-sewing to the manufacturing of clothing was based on the mechanisation of tailoring practices rather than on the wholesale transfer of the production process to machinery. Based in New York City, the entry point for literally millions of skilled and unskilled immigrants from Europe, the fledgling clothing industry faced none of the skilled labour shortages that would act as a spur to earlier innovation in Detroit and elsewhere. Until the advent of immigration restrictions in 1923, labour was so plentiful and competition for jobs so cut-throat that employers could often pass on some of their overheads to the workforce, insisting, on occasion, that workers supply their own machines and thread. Despite technical innovations which occurred before the mid 1920s, technological unemployment remained low as aggregate demand for clothing continued to rise.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, while the incentive to replace labour altogether was much attenuated, the drive to reduce the skill content of sewing jobs was clearly in evidence.

In the move towards mechanisation, though the multiple skilled tasks formerly provided by a single skilled worker (tailor or seamstress) were broken down into separate processes, most still required the use of a distinct if limited skill applied by an individual machine operator to garments handled individually on his or her own machine.

Early innovations that reinforced this relationship include an automatic button-holing machine invented in 1862 and a button sewer patented in 1875.<sup>10</sup> These were followed by blind-stitching machines, which allowed for invisible stitching by pricking fabrics rather than sewing through them; over-edges, that could wrap thread around the edge of a fabric in order to produce a finished appearance; and, early into the twentieth century, new pressing machines and irons that could generate live steam directly. These inventions

all speeded up the pace at which the tailoring task could be carried out,<sup>11</sup> but they did not increase the number of garment pieces that could be worked on simultaneously.

An early exception to this one-to-one link between the individual garment or segment of a garment and the individual operator was the introduction in the 1870s of the steam-powered cutting machine followed in the 1890s by a portable and electrically-powered rotary knife. These enabled an individual worker to cut up to twenty-four layers of cloth at one time.<sup>12</sup> Offering clear advantages in accuracy, efficiency and ease of manoeuvring over hand tools, the new machines rendered obsolete the use of the short-bladed knife and scissors. With the loss of the hand-tooled craft came the rise of a clearly demarcated, highly productive, and hence lucrative source of employment. Women who had been cutters alongside men up to this point, rapidly disappeared from the newly enhanced trade.<sup>13</sup>

All clothing workers in the apparel trades shared the problem of dealing with soft and shapeless raw materials which therefore required – and still require – a great deal of individual handling before being submitted to machinery. As recently as the 1970s, a survey estimated that only 20 per cent of a sewer's time was spent in actually sewing, with the rest spent in garment handling.<sup>14</sup> So industrial development, which adds an increasing assortment of specialist operators – and machines – to an increasingly subdivided sequence of production, must inevitably generate additional dead time between operations, which might or might not be offset by the increased productivity of the operations themselves.

This trade-off between gains in productivity and increases in complexity echoes at the industrial level the ambiguity surrounding the impact of the sewing machine on the home production of clothes. Though advertised as a labour-saving device, it has been argued that the sewing machine served rather to increase expectations of dress (and hence of the dressmaker) leading to the production of ever more elaborate clothing, requiring more seams, trimmings, drapes and ruffles,<sup>15</sup> and enabling 'her to put a hundred tucks where once she put three'.<sup>16</sup> The tendency towards increasing complexity of dress facilitated by the sewing machine exemplifies the more general contradiction between the avowed labour-saving attributes of mechanised forms of housework and the countervailing rise in labour-consuming expectations which such equipment brings in its train.

In the factory, new machinery paved the way for an extraordinary extension in the type of specialist operators which included fellers, basters, snappers, folders, gaugers, etc. All of these facilitated the closer approximation of ready-to-wear clothes to the complexity of hand-sewn clothing rather than tending towards the evolution of distinctly different, more standardised products reflecting newer modes of production.

In such a context, the sequencing of production is obviously critical. Not only does an increase in the subdivision of labour increase the overall time lost to handling by a growing number of participants, each working on one piece at a time. It creates further problems in co-ordinating the pace of each operation and the transfer of garment segments between one work station and the next.

Solutions to the problems of assembly in the clothing industry in the first quarter of the twentieth century more closely resembled the workings of Adam Smith's pin factory of the eighteenth century than they did the production line at Ford's. Assembly methods did improve; switching from the 'bundle' system to the 'straight line' system did shorten the process time for an individual garment, but the scale of productivity gains so generated were modest.

The apparel industry remained one of the least mechanised of all industries. In 1913 at least one third of the 25,000 workers in the waist and dress industry (as the shirtwaist and blouse industry was called) were still engaged in hand operations, and a similar proportion of operators in the coat and suit section of the industry were finishing garments by hand as late as 1921.<sup>17</sup> In 1923 the average horsepower per plant across all industries was 169.0; for men's clothing the corresponding figure was just 11.4,<sup>18</sup> but this was still almost three times the level of power achieved in the women's clothing industry, 4.0.<sup>19</sup>

But even this very modest consumption of power is in a sense misleading. Most of it was used to support an increasing number of individually operated machines. Though these increased in sophistication and speed of operation, they essentially propped up an unchanging production system still firmly based on tailoring. Referred to as the 'whole garment system', it was based on individual operators carrying out all the separate specialist tasks needed to put together an entire garment. Though the manufacturing system had been subdivided into several basic crafts - cutting, operating, finishing and pressing - the skilled operator remained at the heart of what was a largely unspecialised division of labour.<sup>20</sup> Under this system, every garment produced was essentially unique.

Efforts to break the grip of the whole garment system, to subdivide the sewing of a garment into separate operations, led to the development of the 'section work' system. Under this system, one operator would, for example, work exclusively on sleeves, another on collars, a third on cuffs, etc. This system encouraged both the development of standardised garments and of larger production runs. It made possible intra-process inspection to which the whole garment system did not readily lend itself and so led to the possibility of greater quality control.<sup>21</sup>

However, section work did not find easy acceptance within the industry. It did not offer the flexibility in production characteristic of the whole garment system that made it possible to respond immediately and frequently to changes

in style. With a premium on fast turnaround, a whole garment shop could turn an order around in three to four days compared with a much more sluggish three weeks required by a section workshop. Such a system naturally encourages those productive activities that have the capacity to exploit this competitive edge. Of all the main branches in the women's clothing industry, dressmaking, based on the simplest sequence of operations, lent itself most easily to the whole garment system. With the entire dress under the control of one operator, changes in style could be implemented instantly. Once set in train, this short cycle of demand and supply would be hard to break.<sup>22</sup>

#### CHANGES AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The post-war rise in industrial employment, together with growth in the population, lifted the level of disposal incomes (and hence effective demand) to new heights. National transportation and distribution networks began to emerge after the First World War, and these helped to smooth the way for new patterns of consumption.

Although the apparel industry did not play a central role in raising the scale or pace of post-war markets for consumer goods, it was none the less caught up in its consequences. Unprepared for the sudden expansion in demand in the immediate post-war period, the industry remained undercapitalised and undeveloped, made up of a large shifting mass of small and intensely competitive firms too small to wield market power or to reap the economies of scale arising from increasing concentration of capital. The great majority of these clothing firms were very small - in 1929, 96.5 per cent were still single-unit establishments - which made large production runs of standardised products impossible.

Poorly organised and lacking any concentrated leverage, clothing producers were out-manoeuvred by the emergent retail and distribution agencies that gained the upper hand in the 1920s. Their coming together was more a confrontation between unequal partners than a mutually-reinforcing spur to development and the accommodation that ensued retarded the further development of the apparel industry.

#### THE RISE OF THE JOBBER

The rise and consolidation of the power of the jobber was the response of the dressmaking industry in the first decade after the First World War. When manufacturers first began to farm out some of their excess production to outside firms at the end of the nineteenth century, it was the jobber who organised newly arrived immigrant labour for contract work. By the 1920s, he had transformed this middleman role into a much more powerful position,

which widened the gap between the production of clothing and its marketing. The jobber (also referred to as the 'stock house') now took over from the manufacturer all decisions about what was to be produced, how much and when, designing garments, supplying raw materials to contractors, and later, selling the finished products but subcontracting manufacture to outside firms.

The jobber, freed from the technical and labour problems arising in the factory, was able to concentrate his attention on styles and sales. The capacity to commandeer and direct production enabled him to sell to retailers from an exceptionally wide range of stock which could quickly adapt to changes in demand. The emergence of jobbing activity was to some extent a mark of the increasing leverage of retailers who now insisted on both delaying the placing of orders until the last possible moment and on minimising the length of time any merchandise took up prime selling space in their shops.

The consequences of this change for the production of clothing, particularly women's clothing, were almost entirely negative. The new 'hand-to-mouth'<sup>23</sup> buying practice adopted by retailers led to the rapid decline of advance orders on which manufacturers had previously depended to help them plan and smooth out production over a longer period. With increased uncertainty and decreasing production runs, manufacturers (now contractors) could only survive by underbidding each other through either lowering the quality of work or lowering wages or both. Not surprisingly, there was a very high turnover of firms. Of 2,000 dress manufacturers in existence in 1929, 709 were new entrants and 478 went out of business. In 1931 a further 621 new firms entered the fray while 504 abandoned it.

With so little capital required for entry into the business, it was almost as easy to enter the industry as to withdraw from it. As *Fortune Magazine* put it in 1939: 'with \$2,500, a few customers and a colossal amount of nerve, almost anyone can go into the dress business.'<sup>24</sup> Strong family connections in many clothing shops allowed family members to pool savings to elevate one of them up to contractor status, only to see him return the next year to the shop floor. The composition of and boundaries between participating firms were constantly shifting: winners in one year's round of activity might be forced in the next to sell off equipment to last year's losers. Under these circumstances, every employee could become a subcontractor, every subcontractor a manufacturer, every manufacturer, an employee.<sup>25</sup> In effect, dresses were really financed more by the lost savings of contractors, unpaid indebtedness to workers, and many defaults to landlords and power companies than by any kind of planned or dynamic accumulation.<sup>26</sup>

The rise of the jobbing system represented an increasing fragmentation of industrial production at a time when other industries were moving rapidly towards increasing integration and concentration. The loss of direct control over markets, product design and levels of output deprived producers of

important stimulants to technical change, contributing instead to delays in further development.

The fact that the industry became vulnerable to this form of reorganisation is itself a mark of the limits to growth inherent in the preceding generations of technical change. It had not been conducive to the amalgamation of smaller firms into larger units or to heavy investment in dedicated machinery to produce high volume output of standardised goods. Its taking instead what appears as a retrograde step also points to the continuing co-existence of variable modes of production within an economy moving increasingly towards mass production technologies.

The specific path that mechanisation took in this industry preserved the possibility (and hence embodied a preference) for the traditional made-to-measure product over a machine-made one. This led to a potentially open-ended system of product differentiation. As a strategy to widen markets, it would not be more different from the market widening consequences of mass production which were based on very large-scale output of a very limited number of products. The women's clothing industry could not achieve these economies of scale and so pursued a form of market fragmentation as a means of increasing the volume of sales.

#### THE HIGH FASHION HOUSE

The haute couture end of the market producing the most expensive dresses depended for its survival on the notion of exclusiveness, i.e., on the preservation of the privileged relationship between a bespoke tailor and his or her client. Dresses were presented as one-off style 'creations' that enhanced the originality and individuality of the consumer in a world of increasingly mass-produced goods.

The survival of this pre-industrial service relationship kept alive its desirability; it had a profound impact on the imagery of advertising which sought to play down if not conceal entirely the contribution of machinery to the production of clothing while emphasising the individuality of the product. At a time when the superiority of factory over hand-made goods had been decisively established for many other garments purchased by women (stockings, brassières, trousers, etc.), a lingering preference for the designer original dress was propped up and encouraged by the fashion houses.

In France, the home of haute couture, the image of the hand-sewn designer dress was almost literally true. In many fashion establishments, the only machinery ever used was the simple sewing machine. Yet many firms grew to an astonishing size. The House of Chanel employed over two thousand people in twenty-six workrooms, each presided over by its own 'première' in charge of the sketching and sewing of his or her own staff.<sup>27</sup> These firms pushed the

co-ordination of craft work to its limits, mimicking the growing concentration occurring in factory production at the same time but without achieving any of its economies of scale or increases in productivity. They were modern only by virtue of their scale and marketing sophistication but the increased visibility they gained from these attributes conferred a renewed legitimacy on their mode of production which percolated down through all price categories of dress production.

Paradoxically, it was inter-war improvements in air transport and mass communications (giving such a boost to other consumer industries) that enabled French couture (and the attitudes it embodied) to be transplanted to the United States. The practice of presenting the latest Paris and Italian fashions to American buyers was introduced on an experimental basis in the 1930s and had become an established promotional device ten years later.<sup>28</sup>

Their arrival in the United States coincided with the introduction of 'line-for-line' copies,<sup>29</sup> i.e., designer models sold to department store buyers for the explicit purpose of copying. These were often sold at twice the price charged to private clients. They were then reproduced for sale in large numbers at a fraction of their couture price. In this way, couture fashion has had a profound effect on both the demand for and supply of dresses. It forces the dressmaking industry to adapt hand-sewn garments to machine production, i.e., to mimic the very techniques of manufacture it was designed to replace. This inhibits the reverse process, in which the capacity of machinery is pushed to the limits to open up possibilities for technical innovation. The dominance of couture design, therefore, can be viewed as perpetuating a retrograde orientation in production which permeated all layers of dressmaking. (Yet see Valerie Steele's article in this volume, which suggests that Chanel's designs did contain the potential for a mass produced style.)

### WIDENING DIFFERENTIATION

The general tendency towards product differentiation in clothing became more marked during the post-war period, taking new forms which were quickly adopted as standard features. A few of these are briefly described below (large-scale, made-to-measure outlets, special order firms, price lines and the substitution of 'little ticket' for 'big ticket' items). Almost all of them left the basic productive techniques unchallenged and unchanged. The persistence of static and inefficient production methods was to some extent disguised by significant cost reductions that were achieved during the same period in the manufacture of women's clothes, particularly dresses. These were due to external factors, such as the introduction of versatile yet cheap new fabrics, rather than to any changes in the production process itself.

### THE DOMINANCE OF THE MADE-TO-MEASURE ETHOS

In the 1920s the jobbing/contracting system placed a premium on the rapid and repeated turnover of stock, reinforcing a demand that was increasingly fragmented and less and less tied to traditional seasonal buying habits. With decentralised production under the thumb of an increasingly centralised marketing network, it became both possible and necessary to extend markets by massive differentiation of the garments on offer. The organisation of the industry with its proliferation of specialist operators each perpetuating a single tailoring skill, made this approach still feasible.

It is hard to over-estimate the extent to which manufacturers went during this period to minimise risks by extending their markets at the margin of production. A firm with an output of 400,000 suits a year produced them in average lot sizes of twelve.<sup>30</sup> (Astoundingly, many lots were as small as three or four.) Although over 90 per cent of sales were based on variations of just eleven basic models, fear of losing ground to competitors prompted this manufacturer to 'conduct a ready-to-wear business almost on a make-to-measure basis'.<sup>31</sup> Essentially, the strategy pursued was to make up suits only in response to orders, what was then called a 'sell-then-make' policy.

The practice had a predictably destabilising effect on attempts to introduce - and sustain - rational production processes by long-range planning. The organisation of production - which still required from 80 to 150 separate operations to make a sack coat - continued to be dominated by an implied preference for the made-to-measure over the mass-produced garment. The constant switching of styles and fabrics (to which the flexible sewing machine readily lent itself) created havoc on the shop floor with some operators absurdly overworked and others kept idle or waiting for their next piece of work.

Despite these drawbacks, the dressmaking business did offer the possibility of considerable profits. Dress firms, on average, turned over their capital seven or eight times a year.<sup>32</sup> Occasionally a firm offering a particularly 'hot' style could reap windfall profits over a very short period. But investment remained pitched to the short term; capital was almost universally financed by credit rather than by retained earnings. Under these conditions, long-term planning was impossible.

### SPECIAL ORDER FIRMS

The emergence of special order firms represents an attempt to stabilise production in some firms by hiving off the highest-risk elements of demand, i.e., those catering to late-flowering elements of consumer preferences. It represented an attempt to push out the limits of the market, by extending differentiation at the margin.



Special order firms were offered impossible deadlines at very short notice one month and the next would find no work at all. Given the feast or famine framework in which these firms operated, it was inevitable that wage payments would continue to depend on piece rates, i.e., that attempts to win a weekly wage would fail.

In the ready-to-wear branch of the industry in Chicago over the period 1923-1930, the minimum payroll, i.e., for the least active week of the seasonal cycle, reached 48 per cent of the payroll for the maximum week while in the special order branch it was only 25 per cent.<sup>33</sup> In other words, wages associated with peak activity in the special order branch were four times higher than payments made during periods of slack compared with wages in the ready-to-wear branch that were, at their peak, just double those achieved at the slowest point in the seasonal cycle. This points to a great deal of idle capacity combined with high overheads which of course must be carried over the full year.

Special order firms or special order departments within retailing outlets persisted well into the second half of the twentieth century. The English firm of Montague Burton specialised in made-to-measure men's suits on a massive scale. Set up in Sheffield in 1900 as retail clothiers, at their peak in 1950 they were responsible for providing employment for more than 100,000 people.<sup>34</sup> The Bergdorf Goodman store in New York City did not abandon its custom operations until 1969, after seventy years of continuous operation.<sup>35</sup>

### PRICE LINES

Another important strategy for diffusing risk was the introduction of price lines. Widely adopted in the dressmaking branch of the industry, this practice segmented the market for dresses into rigid price categories which allowed for a varying proportion of skilled labour to be applied to similar styles and fabrics, according to circumstances.

'Price lining' led to a reversal of the usual relationship between cost and price in which the former, under conditions of competition, determined the latter. Under 'price lining', dresses could be 'built' up or down by manufacturers to given price categories, thereby squeezing the gross margin of retailers.<sup>36</sup> Retailers meanwhile benefited from price lines because the practice allowed them to carry smaller stocks in each category which could be turned over faster. However, while serving to limit risk to both manufacturer and retailer, this practice acted as a further disincentive to both cheapening and standardising production.

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE 'LITTLE TICKET' ITEM

Another change which encouraged a higher rate of turnover in apparel stocks was the gradual emergence of 'separates'. Ready-made suits and dresses had traditionally been thought of as major purchases, like many other consumer durables. They involved a major outlay and were expected to be used over several seasons, if not years. The 1920s eroded this approach to clothing, encouraging the idea of obsolescence in fashion and design. Manufacturers had been left with unused capacity in a depression which followed a sudden surge in demand in the immediate post-war period.

They turned to the production of separates, promoting the substitution of jackets and trousers for suits, and sweaters and skirts for dresses. Each of these so-called 'little ticket' items was cheaper to produce - and to buy - than the 'big ticket' item which it replaced. Wardrobes could be infinitely extended by the incremental addition or substitution of relatively inexpensive individual garments. Items which quickly became unfashionable could be discarded without guilt. Small-scale clothing purchases could be made continuously.

By this means, clothing was transformed from a consumer durable to a non-durable good. The changeover was accompanied by yet another form of differentiation, an emphasis on the versatility of separates. An article in the *Atlantic Monthly* (1953) cites their ability to provide 'a greater variety of effects for a given outlay. For instance, three skirts and three blouses, waists or sweaters are capable of nine different combinations, whereas three dresses are still only three dresses.'<sup>37</sup> Between 1929 and 1950, the number of dresses as a proportion of the total production of women's 'outerwear' garments declined from 86.9 per cent to 53.1 per cent, while the share of blouses and skirts over the same period rose from 2.7 per cent to 37.9 per cent.<sup>38</sup> The switch to coordinates pushed up the total volume of purchases at the expense of individual profit margins which declined. It also to some extent further facilitated deskilling as the subdivision of outfits into their separate components led to a subdivision of the tasks involved in their manufacture. It did not, however, generate any significant changes in production techniques.

### THE INTRODUCTION OF NEW FABRICS

The failure to adopt mass-production techniques in dressmaking was masked to some extent by significant advances in the production of textiles, the raw materials of clothing. In the strongest possible contrast to the apparel industry, textiles - having got off to an early start - showed all the classic features of mass production. The industry was heavily capitalised, highly concentrated and operated large-scale production units. By 1918, it was surpassed only by the iron and steel industry in the total volume of capital invested.<sup>39</sup>

Particularly important for the dressmaking trade was the emergence and rapid diffusion of synthetic materials, especially rayon. Introduced in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century, rayon was first known and worked as 'artificial silk'. At the beginning of the 1920s, top quality rayon cost \$2.80 a pound compared with \$8.65 for raw silk.<sup>40</sup> Over the next two decades, its price fell dramatically. By 1940, an improved rayon cost just 53 cents a pound. Consumption in that year was twelve times higher than it had been in 1923.

The take-up of rayon enabled the dressmaking industry to reduce the prices of finished products without having to undergo any changes in technology or organisation. Furthermore, the improved rayon of the 1940s allowed for widening of the market for the cheapest grade of dress, which now was able to reproduce on a larger scale styles of dress traditionally made in small batches of more expensive fabrics. Since the greatest scope for standardisation already lay at the bottom end of the market where skilled labour and design costs were minimised (in the so-called 'dozen-priced' dress category), the introduction of rayon in effect facilitated a quantum leap in the production of mass-produced garments.

### THE DECLINE OF THE NEW YORK GARMENT INDUSTRY

The rise of the cheap dress corresponds with and was in large measure responsible for triggering the decline of the specialised industrial district that was the New York City garment centre. The increasing substitution of unskilled for skilled machine operators, which accompanied the spread of synthetic fibres and the development of improved freight transport, enabled manufacturers to relocate outside New York City, in areas of cheap labour, beyond the grip of the city's high wages and closed shops.

The nub of the industry left behind continued to depend upon the same organisation and technical base established generations earlier. It made a virtue of necessity by concentrating increasingly on the margin of markets, increasing differentiation of products as it has decreased their volume of production. Rather than cheapening its products, it has turned more to the custom-made end of the spectrum, relying more heavily on those aspects of design which increase the cost differentials between its own products and those mass-produced in the hinterlands. It has then exploited this reputation by using its top-of-the-line activity (which is largely unprofitable for most firms) as a loss leader for designer brand, ready-to-wear price lines pitched to lower income groups.

Taking the long view, it is clear that differentiation in apparel has been incontrovertibly – and almost uninterruptedly – the norm, from the days when all clothing was hand-made. The mechanism of tailoring skills did not replace this attribute of clothing with an alternative idea of apparel as a

consumer durable designed to be worn until literally worn out. Instead, it preserved the possibility for a high turnover of an unlimited elaboration of styles. Constant renewal of designs substituted for high levels of output. The industrial organisation that emerged in the dressmaking sector exploited this open-endedness, first by continuously maintaining a large and constantly shifting pool of compliant and competing small-scale contractors, and secondly by rooting transactions and market strategies exclusively in the short term. In this way, dresses came to be marketed more like perishables, 'like milk that spoils and citrus fruits that decay'.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, this active strategy for survival was recast as a passive response to changes in consumer demand. The fickle consumer, and by extension, the retailer, were charged with responsibility for encouraging the increased differentiation and turnover in fashion goods. Set against this tradition, the longevity of truly popular garments like Levi 501 jeans bedevils the industry – and contradicts the classic 'consumptionist' explanations from Veblen onwards – because it suggests an underlying receptivity to genuinely mass-produced clothing that contradicts what has been accepted as orthodox behaviour. Indeed, outside the dressmaking sector, it is possible to discern a clear development in the mass-production of clothing growing out of ready-to-wear markets for simple goods selling at modest prices. Levi 501s embody the dynamics of this opposing tradition which is based on a widening of markets through a trickling up of demand for machine-made garments with their distinct qualities. This contradicts the tradition discussed here of a 'fashion system' which takes the hand-sewn product as the ideal form and which tolerates the sewing machine because it allows the original to trickle down in cheapened form into more profitable volume production.

### Notes and References

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- 1 *Working Party Report on the Light Clothing Industry*, HMSO, London, 1947, Chapter 6, pp. 25–8, and Appendix I, pp. 87–99.
- 2 The descriptive history of costume is exemplified by the many volumes of Phyllis and Cecil Willett Cunnington. The works of René König and James Laver among many others offer psychological explanations for changes in taste. More recent writers have
- 3 *Advertising Age*, 12 July 1937, pp. 14–15, quoted in Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Myself Modernity, 1920–1940*, Berkeley, 1985, p. 162.
- 4 Quoted in Louis Levine, *Women's Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union*, New York, 1924, p. 382.

moved towards an analysis of the social construction of fashion in the context of economic and cultural change. See particularly, Elizabeth Wilson and Lou Taylor, *Through the Looking Glass*, London, 1989.

- 5 Alison Beazley, 'The "Heavy" and "Light" Clothing Industries 1850-1920', *Costume*, vol. VII, 1973, p. 56.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Roy Helgott, *Made in New York: Case Studies in Metropolitan Manufacturing*, ed. Max Hall, Cambridge, Mass., 1959, p. 54. The idea that the 1920s witnessed 'the birth of the idea of clothing obsolescence' is also put forward in Claudia B. Kidwell and M.C. Christman, *Suiting Everyone: The Democratization of Clothing in America, 1974*. Though the history of dressmaking in Britain closely parallels the US experience in most important respects, the United States was the source of most technical innovation that occurred during this period. Factory production of dresses in Britain lagged behind its US counterpart, dating from about 1930 (Margaret Wray, *The Women's Outerwear Industry*, London, 1957, p. 41).
- 8 David Gartman, 'Origins of the Assembly Line and Capitalist Control of Work at Ford', in *Case Studies on the Labor Process*, ed. Andrew Zimbalist, *Monthly Review Press*, p. 192.
- 9 Robert James Myers, 'The Economic Aspects of the Production of Men's Clothing (with particular reference to the industry in Chicago)', part of a PhD dissertation submitted to the Department of Economics, University of Chicago Libraries, Chicago, 1937, p. 43. Subsequent slackening of demand and further productivity gains did push out large numbers of mostly male workers from the industry.
- 10 O.E. Schoeffler and W. Gale, *Esquire's Encyclopaedia of 20th Century Men's Fashions*, 1973, p. 512.
- 11 The earliest sewing machines could sew 800 to 900 stitches per minute. The application of electric power increased their speeds to between 2,000 and 4,000 stitches per minute (Helgott, *op. cit.*, p. 38).
- 12 Kidwell and Christman, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
- 13 Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- 14 Louise Lamphere, 'Fighting the Piece-Rate System', in *Case Studies on the Labor Process*, *op. cit.*
- 15 Ava Baron and Susan E. Clepp, 'If I didn't have my sewing machine... Women and Sewing-machine Technology', in J.M. Jensen and Sue Davidson (eds), *A Needle, A Bobbin, a Strike: Women Needleworkers in America, 1984*, p. 37.
- 16 See Margaret L. Brew, *American Clothing Consumption 1879-1909*, University of Chicago, PhD thesis, 1948, p. 424.
- 17 Roger Waldinger, 'Another Look at the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union: Women, Industry, Structure and Collective Action', in Ruth Milkman (ed.), *Women, Work and Protest*, London, 1985, p. 94.
- 18 In a typical large, men's clothing factory in the mid 1930s, though fifty to seventy-five different types of sewing machine might be in use, no commonly used machine occupied more than a few square feet of space, or cost more than \$1,000. Up to three hundred different operators might be employed in the production of a single suit. Myers *op. cit.*, p. 12.
- 19 Helen E. Meiklejohn, *Dresses - The Impact on a Business*, New York, 1938, p. 316.
- 20 Nathan Belfer, 'Section work in the women's garment industry', *Southern Economic Journal*, October 1954, vol. XXI, no. 2, p. 188.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- 22 As late as 1950, just 1 per cent of workers and less than 1 per cent of shops in the women's dress, coat and suit industry in Manhattan worked on a section work basis. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- 23 This phrase is echoed today by Benetton's 'sell-then-make' strategy, a variant on the more general 'just-in-time' system that seeks to reduce inventories by closing the gap between demand and supply.
- 24 Meiklejohn, p. 324; and Roger Waldinger in Milkman, *op. cit.*, p. 103. Fifteen years later, in 1954, it was still possible to start up a dress or blouse firm in New York for as little as \$15,000 in capital. (Helgott *op. cit.*, p. 30).
- 25 Michael J. Piore and Charles E. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide*, New York, 1984, p. 29, referring to clothing workers in Italy.
- 26 Meiklejohn, *op. cit.*, p. 351.
- 27 Barbara Yu, 'The Fashion Industry: A Compromised Technology', Harvard College Honors Thesis, 1978, p. 95. Even in the 1960s, the sewing machine was used to carry out just 2-3 per cent of the work in high fashion houses; it still took at least four workers 65-90 hours to make a simple dress or suit. (Bernard Roshco, *The Rag Race: How New York and Paris run the breakneck business of dressing American women*, New York, 1963, p. 179).
- 28 Roshco, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 153. The phrase 'line-for-line' is attributed to Macy's department store in New York City.
- 30 The Committee on Elimination of Waste in Industry of the Federated American Engineering Societies, *Waste in Industry, 1921*, p. 96.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- 32 Helgott, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
- 33 Myers, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
- 34 K. Mutton, *The Archaeology of the Consumer Society*, 1983, p. 68.
- 35 Jeanette A. Jarrow, Beatrice Judelle and Miriam Guerreto, *Inside the Fashion Business: Texts and Readings*, New York, 1981, p. 279.
- 36 Meiklejohn, *op. cit.*, p. 380.
- 37 Fessenden Blanchard, 'Revolution in Clothes', *Harper's Monthly*, March 1953, p. 60.
- 38 Market Planning Service, division of National Credit Office Inc., *The Apparel Manufacturing Industry*, New York, 1952, p. 12.
- 39 The Committee on Elimination of Waste in Industry, *op. cit.*, p. 240.
- 40 Drake and Glasser, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
- 41 Meiklejohn, *op. cit.*, p. 325.