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Slow Fashion: An Invitation for Systems Change

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Abstract

In some circles, “fast” has become a proxy for a type of fashion that epitomizes ideas of unsustainability; yet high speed is not in itself a descriptor of unethical and/or environmentally damaging practices but a tool that is used to increase sales and deliver economic growth with attendant ecological and social effects. Questions about speed probe deeply into the economic systems, business models, and value sets that underpin the fashion sector today and which profoundly shape its sustainability potential. In this article, ideas and practices of the lexicographical opposite to “fast,” i.e. slow culture, are framed as an

opportunity to begin to engage better with systems-level questions in the fashion sector in order to build deeper and longer-lasting change towards sustainability.

KEYWORDS: slow, fast, sustainability, systems change

Ideas and language associated with speed today pepper the fashion landscape. In the last ten years “fast” and “slow” have both been paired with “fashion” in neologisms meant to connote a wide range of practices that are either more or less large-scale, logistics-dominated, economic growth-focused, ethical or ecological; in ways heavily influenced by the food sector. Indeed like fast food, fast fashion is mass-produced and standardized. The unbeatably cheap top, dress or pair of jeans, like the hamburger, is traded in large volumes, is globally ubiquitous, and is homogeneously served or styled. Designed to be cheap, easy, and rapid to produce; it draws on low-cost materials and labor, short lead times, and efficient large volume production. Created to be distributed, sold, and consumed in ever-increasing quantities, it is priced low and brought to market fast. New styles, quickly copied from catwalks or high-end labels, are introduced into stores every few weeks, exploiting the consumer desire for novelty. Sales and growth are increased by maximizing economies of scale and minimizing costs. In both food and fashion, “fast” is an economic tool, a lever to be pushed and pulled, in order to increase product throughput and grow profit. Fast fashion is fashion shaped not by speed but by a set of business practices focused on achieving continual economic growth; the most universally accepted goal in the world.

In the fashion sector, the logic of growth is well established as the basis of power and prosperity. The system that grows fastest is considered best and is sustained because people believe in it. Belying this apparent simplicity, the implications of economic growth are complex. In the last sixty years the size of the global economy has increased by a factor of five (Jackson 2009: 5) and the default assumption is that this will go on expanding indefinitely both in poor countries, where better quality of life is unquestionably needed, and in rich nations, where it has been shown that material wealth—the goal of growth—adds little to happiness (Spratt *et al.* 2009). At the same time, a slew of indicators reveal the implications of this economic structure on environmental and social quality: compared to just two generations ago, global poverty is just as endemic—with two billion people still living on less than \$2 a day; social cohesion, particularly in the rich West, is weaker (Hamilton 2003); atmospheric carbon concentrations are at far higher levels; natural environments are more degraded; and there are growing numbers of conflicts over land use and access to water (Stern 2007).

Few people would dispute that if we had more resources and were truly richer, we would be better able to solve a wide range of problems.

The question is whether further economic growth would in fact add to this richness; or whether it actually undermines social wealth and environmental quality, ultimately making us poorer (Daly 1992: 100). In fashion, like other sectors, the cost implications of the growth model are felt mainly externally to the corporation enjoying the benefits: by society at large, by workers, and the environment. Costs are experienced as increased pollution, resource depletion, and climate change costs, due to the ever-greater throughput of physical products necessary to continually grow a business. They are borne by clothing workers' "poverty" wages and reflected in temporary employment contracts and unpaid overtime, as their employers are squeezed on price and order times by large retailers and global brands wielding their economic power and economies of scale. They are felt as lack of choice and variety of garments on the high street as low cost, "big-box" retailers create a dynamic that prioritizes cheapness, mass availability, and volume purchasing above all else and that forces smaller producers, who cannot compete on price alone, out of business.

In the food sector, the opening of a McDonalds fast food restaurant—the epitome of homogenized and "quantity" eating—in the center of Rome two decades ago was interpreted as a sign that economic growth was, contrary to prevailing thought, actually reducing society's wealth, not increasing it. A group of Italian activists, used to long, family meals and traditional, highly regionalized cuisine responded to the expansion of the "fast" model with a social movement, known as Slow Food (<http://www.slowfood.com/>). Slow Food began as the defense of the quiet material pleasures of cooking and eating and has since grown into a vehicle for reconnecting people to their communities and bioregions through the food on their plate. It has a vocabulary and set of nested values based on local, artisan, and traditional production, on material pleasure and convivial experience, on diversity and ecosystem health, and on awareness, responsibility, and information. Slow Food started as a reaction to globalized, homogenized, fast food culture, but quickly became something other than its opposite. For the root of the issues of the Slow Food Movement are not just evident concerns about the fact that people are now eating alone in cars with food bought at drive-through serving hatches; but a fundamental rejection of a set of economic priorities which mean that large-scale, mass-production business models thrive above all else. The Slow Food Movement is a gestalt switch that tackles values and behavior at the level of economic priorities and business practices and supplants the distorted emphasis placed on consumption and production by conventional economics with a broader set of goals that value traditions, ecological diversity, health, pleasure, employment, and safety of the future.

In fashion, the low-cost, homogenous, "quantity" dressing that has seen the UK's budget clothing market grow by 45% in the last five years, twice the rate of the normal clothing market (Shah 2008), has

also raised questions about social and environmental “richness” of the volume-budget model (Carter 2008). Low price has overseen a change in purchasing and wearing habits. Garments are often bought in multiples and discarded quickly for they have little perceived value. Fabric quality is poor and garment construction often fails to withstand laundering, promoting rapid replacement. Unlimited wants, given succor by rapidly changing trends, are treated with unlimited production. Against such a backdrop of growth-obsessed activity, a movement promoting slow culture and values in fashion has emerged, albeit with less coherence than in food. And just as in the food sector, the slow movement in fashion has grown into something more than just fast fashion minus the bad bits; for that would confine it to tinkering with today’s practices. Nor is it a descriptor of speed, but a different worldview that names a coherent set of fashion activity that promotes variety and multiplicity of fashion production and consumption and that celebrates the pleasure and cultural significance of fashion within biophysical limits. Clearly, time has a part to play in this and slower approaches often allow for example, longer-term relationships to develop that recognize the value of wisdom from experience; though speed is but one of many mechanisms for inducing diversity, pleasure, and quality. Slow fashion represents a vision of sustainability in the fashion sector based on different values and goals to the present day. It requires a changed infrastructure and a reduced throughput of goods. Categorically, slow fashion is not business-as-usual but just involving design classics. Nor is it production-as-usual but with long lead times. Slow fashion represents a blatant discontinuity with the practices of today’s sector; a break from the values and goals of fast (growth-based) fashion. It is a vision of the fashion sector built from a different starting point.

Yet this is not how slow fashion is commonly understood. Quite the opposite in fact, slow fashion has been superficially mediated and adopted particularly by the fashion media as a descriptor for products that are in some way less fast. Here “slow” is understood literally and equated with, say, durable products, traditional production techniques or design concepts that are season-less. The term “slow fashion” is used to segment and differentiate garments produced in the growth fashion model in a fresh way; to offer a new marketing angle on products and brands that happen to have a long heritage, durable pieces or classic design. Slow fashion—largely because it is the lexicographical opponent of fast fashion—is wheeled in to offer apparent legitimacy to existing products and business models, conferring upon them a sense of ethics and resourcefulness because the normal cycle of trend induced change and consumption is eschewed. But slow fashion this is not. While fast is the opposite of slow in language; in the context of slow culture; fast and slow are not in opposition. They are different worldviews, with different economic logic and business models, values, and processes. This is not to say that long-lasting products, skilled traditional making

techniques, and stock deliveries at a time that suits the maker do not feature heavily in deep readings of slow fashion (as they do in shallow ones), but these (and more) details and strategies flow down from the different goals and priorities of slow culture, rather than being forged from the components of today's fashion culture that happen to be less materially growth-focused.

Much of the persistent confusion about slow fashion derives from "lock in" to the current fashion model's worldview and conception of the way things are done. Just as the gauge of train tracks limits ideas about the sorts of train that can operate on them, prevailing ways of thinking lock us into particular ideas about the shape and practices of the fashion sector. So while the effects of growth (fast) fashion are often portrayed as undesirable, solutions tend to be couched as extensions and/or modifications of these undesirable practices and the status quo. We seem to think, for example, that providing long-term supply chain relationships are promoted or garments are designed to be trans-seasonal, volumes can keep increasing and current economic preferences can be maintained. "Lock in" confers apparent immutability to current industrial structures, putting paid to scrutiny of the structures themselves and whether they actually lead to social and ecological richness and satisfaction. Slow culture, rather being allowed to seed a radical new approach, gets passed through the sieve of understanding and hierarchy of priorities and goals prevalent in today's industry and becomes absorbed not as high-level systems change (where the rules and goals of the industry are transformed) but as a marketing angle or alternative distribution channel in the current model, a tweaked version of today's practices. Seen against an unchanged economic model in the fashion sector, slow culture jars and makes little sense, for its goals and ambition are broader than can be measured by the narrow metrics of economic growth. Against the prevailing growth-focused fashion worldview, slow is understood not for how it can transform the sector at root, but for how it can increase sales: reducing it to the status of paradox. Here slow culture becomes transmogrified into a trend and because of the elaborate relationship between trends, commerce, and fashion, slowness becomes seen as a tool for increased material throughput and continual economic growth. Taken superficially, slow cannot break the cycle of fast fashion, because change is not perceived deep enough. For the negative effects of growth (fast) fashion are endemic to the sector's underlying economic model. The better the fashion sector performs; the worse these effects will get. "Lock in" channels thinking towards conclusions that reinforce the seeming inevitability of dominant growth-based fast fashion ("most young people have only ever known fast fashion, will they be able to change their shopping habits?")¹ because growth fashion is not understood for what it is: a business model tied to a specific set of economic priorities. We created it. We can create something else.

Above all else, slow culture is an invitation to think about systems change in the fashion sector and to question the role of economic growth, underlying values, and worldviews in fashion so that a different and truly “richer” society develops. It does this by framing the fashion sector as a subsystem of the larger system of economics, society, and planetary ecosystems and recognizing that in order to change fashion, economic and social practices that shape, limit, and give meaning to the sector have to be part of the fashion debate. For the question is not can we produce more fashion (we know that this is possible), but what are the sociocultural and ecological consequences of doing so? Are the benefits worth the extra costs? And what sorts of fashion system would best serve our total needs? Slow culture helps initiate a long-overdue dialogue about questions about the rules and goals of the fashion sector that challenge values and economic priorities head on.

The slow culture vocabulary of small-scale production, traditional craft techniques, local materials and markets, that has proved so successful in food, offers one set of responses to these questions. It challenges growth fashion’s obsession with mass-production and globalized style and becomes a guardian of diversity and proponents of it can be seen around the world. It questions growth fashion’s emphasis on image, looking, and “the new” over making and maintaining actual material garments (Clark 2008), re-finding earlier experiences of fashion linked to active making rather than watching (Thorpe 2007: 124). It offers a changed set of power relations between fashion creators and consumers compared with growth fashion, based on the forging of relationships and trust that is possible at smaller scales. It professes a heightened state of awareness of the design process and its impacts on resource flows, workers, communities, and ecosystems. It prices garments higher than in the growth model to reflect true ecological and social costs and as a production model it offers a radical alternative to high-volume, standardized fashion, making profit by selling fewer higher priced items. Slow culture (even with associated high prices) is also seen to promote the democratization of fashion not by offering more people access to clothes by lowering prices (a claim often made in support of fast growth fashion) but by offering these same people more control over institutions and technologies that affect their lives.

Ideas of slow culture are part of a bigger story of change and transformation in the fashion sector towards sustainability. A story concerned with remodeling what we mean by development and success in fashion and profoundly rethinking the values that underpin these most influential of concepts. Sustainability requires that a foundation be laid of a different economic system with different values in the context of a wiser, saner worldview.

As I have written elsewhere, much of this remodeling is likely to be infused with different speeds of activity reinforcing the relevance of ideas and language of fast and slow tempos in fashion (Fletcher 2008).

Sustainability looks to natural systems and processes for inspiration and nature uses both fast and slow tempos to foster long-term stability and short-term vitality. Slow regulating systems have fast moving parts within them. Sustainability is predicated on ideas of balance and different speeds can confer this. The challenge for us all is to model and influence the overall regulating fashion system to promote balance accompanied by richness across economic, social, and ecological systems as a whole. To make use of vital social movements like slow culture as a lever for deep and lasting change in fashion.

Note

1. This was one of numerous questions I received by e-mail in 2010 from students investigating fast and slow fashion.

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