

Student number – 2007837

Design and Craft

I shall be answering Question 5: From the series of Thinking Making research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners

Word count – 2706

Tutors Name - Julia Lockheart

Within this essay I shall be investigating the role of consumption and the ongoing need to consume. Beginning with the origins of fast fashion, I shall examine the causal links to capitalism in addition to the devastating impact of the manufacturing and waste produced to fuel modern day consumerist society. I shall endeavour to explain the links between capitalism and colonialism and how they still exist within fast fashion. Using Marx's range of value theories, Erich Fromm, online sources and a range of points by current fast fashion activists, I will explore how value is gained by the capitalist and lost by the labourers. Concluding sections will consider various forms of value and how these could potentially help shift our views away from disposable consumerism.

Fast fashion creation and waste

Fast fashion as defined by Collins dictionary, is the "reproduction of highly fashionable clothes at high speed and low cost" (2021). The question to be posed however is how low cost is the fast fashion world that many consumers have become reliant upon.

In recent years there has been a shift from purchasing high quality brands to purchasing cheaper replicas at a lower price and quality. The phrase 'fast fashion' was coined in the 2000's to describe the process of creating affordable replicas of catwalk trends at very high speeds and volumes into high street and online stores. The retailer's aim was to create a quick turnover and increased profit by changing the supply chain to result in faster manufacturing at a lower price and quality (Edology, 2022). To achieve this, labour has been predominantly moved to low-income countries such as India, China, Bangladesh and Vietnam to name but a few (McCosker, 2021). Clothes are released into the stores in 'seasons', originally just four seasons per year to reflect nature's seasons. This all changed in America in 1914 when there was a shift towards multi-clothing seasons as the then editor and chief of Vogue magazine Edna Woolman Chase started the 'Fashion Fete'. In 1973 Paris fashion joined in and had its first ever fashion week, this was followed by Milan and then in 1984 London joined creating the 'Big Four'. These fashion show events were an opportunity for big fashion cities to showcase themselves. The whole industry worked towards a yearly event. This was when fashion first had the power to say what was 'in or out' of fashion. In the coming years Zara took to releasing new clothing lines in weeks rather than months (all the above facts: Zayah World, 2015). Now some brands have up to 50 seasons

per year which means new clothing can be presented daily (Barber, 2021, p.124). In the past 40 years clothing sales have boomed leading to consumers buying five times more clothes than they did in 1980 (Foussianes, 2020). However, from personal experience it is difficult to find a warm baby coat when it's snowing in March as all the stores are now stocking the next season.

So what are the impacts of this cheap clothing sales boom now. According to Fashion United, the global fashion industry is valued at 3 trillion dollars which equates to 2% of the world's Gross Domestic Product (Fashion United, 2022) but it also creates a massive 92 million tonnes of waste and consumes 79 trillion litres of water (Niinimäki, Peters et al., 2020) bearing in mind that access to fresh water is becoming an ever-increasing global concern and this figure is set to double by 2030 (Bramwell, 2020). This is completely unsustainable. In 2020 consumers in America bought on average 68 garments and only wore them seven times before disposing of them (Foussianes, 2020). People do not value their clothing anymore; it has become disposable. The average American throws away 37kg of clothes every year and 92 million tonnes of textile waste is created globally (Beall, 2020). This includes clothes that are not even sold which astoundingly equates to 20% of the total (Foussianes, 2020). This has a detrimental impact on the environment as only 12% of materials used within garments are recycled. Leading brands sometimes use recycled polyester made from plastic bottles however with the quantity of clothing waste it can be argued that the 'recycled bottles' (Beall, 2020) simply enter the ground via another route.

The truth behind where our clothing charity shop donations go is eye opening, only 10-20% of our donations are sold in the shops whilst the rest are sorted and a small percentage are redistributed to other charities. The majority however is unwanted and "gets turned into bails and shipped to various locations in the Global South" (Barber, 2021, p.60). A massive 15 million garments get sent to Kantamanto market in Accra, Ghana every week. This ironically is the same amount of Americans who in 2011, the American Psychological Society reported to have suffered with a spending addiction. Low quality fast fashion are making up an ever-increasing amount of the clothing sent; these items can arrive damaged and cannot be sold. So what can they do with our rubbish? Well, 40% of all the garments sent end up in landfill or burnt, some of this waste even falls into the sea and because most of fast fashion is made from cheaper synthetic fibres they don't break down and this causes even more pollution. The fashion industry loses an incredible 500 billion US dollars in waste each year (Fast fashion: The dumping ground for unwanted clothes', 2021). We think we are doing good by donating to charity whilst in actual fact we are just making our bad purchasing decisions

someone else's problem. It cost Accra \$100,000 every year in fees for our waste to go to landfill. "Just imagine if the world kept dumping clothes on your doorstep and your tax money was used to clean it up" (Barber, 2021, p.63). Maybe copying the ingredients label idea from the foods industry and placing it within clothing would allow consumers to make better informed decisions on which brands they choose to support. Where by instead of ingredients and nutrition labels it could show where the labourer lives and what percentage of a liveable wage they earned, where the cloth was made, the amount of water in its production, the amount of pollution omitted from the factory, the air miles it's travelled, brands reinvestment percentage of profits back into these communities and polluted districts, sustainability and carbon neutral achievements met. This would enable Consumers to easily see who is getting their money (labourer or multibillion dollar Capitalists brands) and what impact their purchase is having on the environment.

We are supporting the capitalists when we consume fast fashion because we are paying for big brands to become bigger and richer whilst exploiting those at the bottom and with very little pay. This contributes massively to global pollution and global warming. It must be questioned therefore why this is still taking place and allowed to happen. Consuming relieves anxiety because what we have can't be taken away. But this requires us to consume even more as our previous purchases soon loses its pleasant character (Fromm, 2021). The *Consumed* documentary suggests that the empty void inside a person will be never ending because the root of the problem is not being tackled; as with every addiction, the void is fed with more and more however it can never be filled (*Consumed- Inside the belly of the beast*, 2011). Living in an what can be considered an advantageous society arguably people have fewer problems than years ago and this has led to a rise in consumerism, a need to fill the free time with the short-lived thrill of shopping. A large amount of advertising is aimed directly at children so inevitably the next generation are being trained to consume right from the beginning of their little lives.

Colonialism and Fast Fashion and how it has been built to fuel Capitalism

The online dictionary Lexico.com defines the meaning of 'Colonialism' as follows-
"The policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically" (Lexico.com, 2021).

To investigate the links between colonialism and capitalism in contemporary society, The Slow Factory conducted research in 2016. They examined the relationship between

International trade routes of fast fashion today to extract resources such as silk, polyester, cotton, labour and manufacturing and these trade routes match identically with historical colonial trade routes from 150 years ago (Barber, 2021).

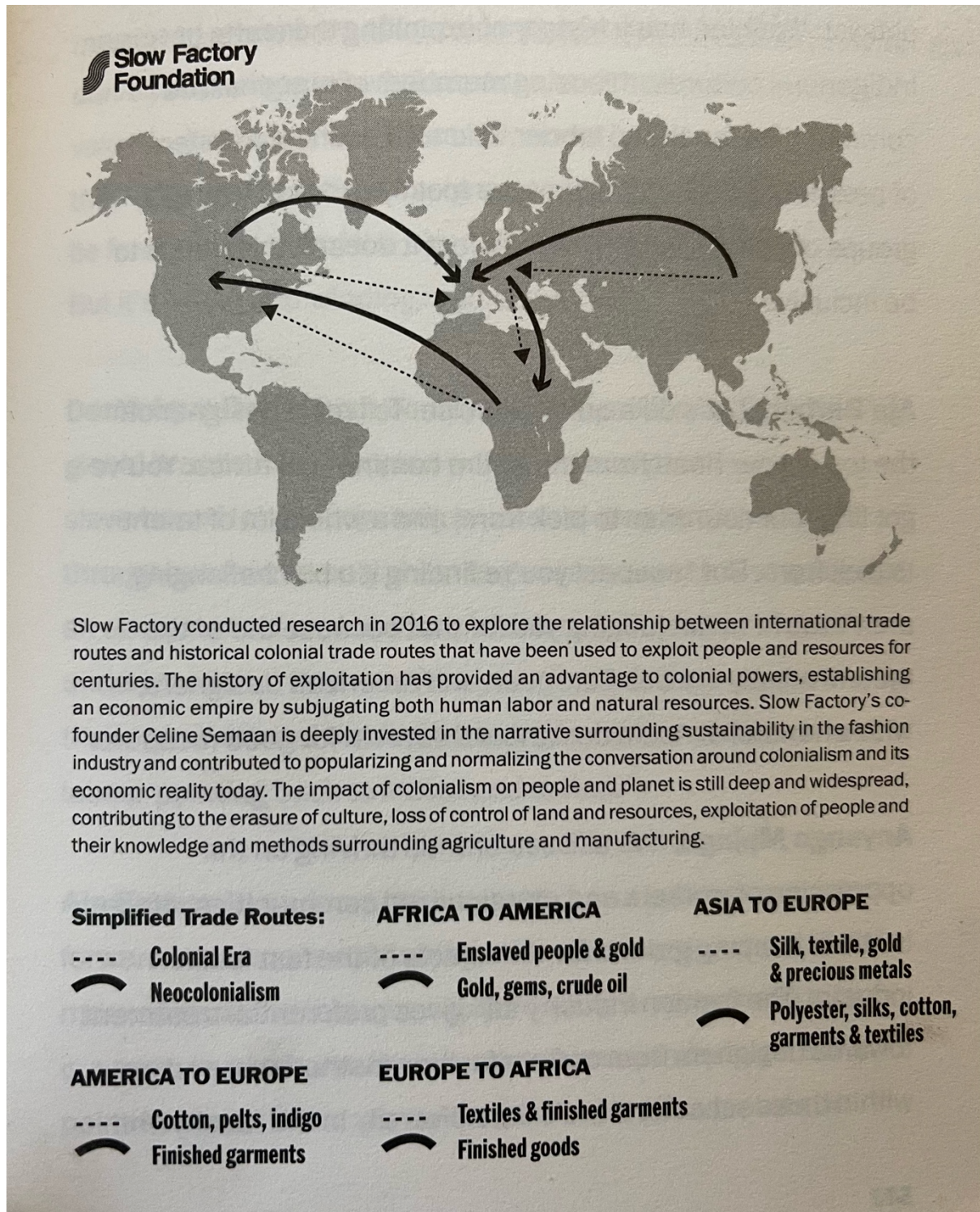


Fig. 1: Slow Factory Foundation map of colonial routes and international trade routes today.

To explain how this is still happening Kalkidan Legeese (fast fashion activist) explains that the fashion industry as it is today was created on the promise of reduced labour costs in the Global East. As wages went up in places like the UK, brands saw the opportunity to make products at lower cost elsewhere. Capitalist companies learned that they could use tactics to keep prices low, including prolonged low wages, weakening of worker's rights and only offering short term contracts. These methods would create internal price wars lowering the garment workers wages even further (Barber, 2021). These practices of extortion arguably could be replaced by something much fairer considering the vast profit accumulated by these brands, such as having a global worker's minimum pay linked instead to the profit margin. Marx's Surplus Value Theory accurately explains how Capitalists are still cashing in, in contemporary society. The countries producing the clothes are paid less than a living wage for the labour they provide but the value of the raw and other materials, wear and tear on machinery etc are included in this price; there is already a guaranteed profit for the Capitalist, this is a 'surplus value'. Capitalists are gaining garments/ commodities at a price that does not reflect or incorporate the encompassed value in the way of human value, social value, material value or epistemic value to name but a few. Marx's theory of 'productive' and 'unproductive' labour, was named from the standpoint of the Capitalist as "where income was greater than expenditure, an enterprise was deemed productive" hence 'productive labour'; "those who drew down on the surplus as consumers without producing were deemed unproductive" (Pitts, 2021, p.11). This is still very current considering these theories were devised in the 1800's. Marx further argues, "it is the quantity of labour required for its production (the association with fast fashion garments springs to mind here), not the realised form of the labour, by which the amount of the value of a commodity is determined". "Labour is the substance, and the imminent measure of value, but has no value in itself" (Marx, 2008, p.310), this is beautifully cemented by Pitts with - "Value is something created autonomously by labour, and then subsequently subject to attempted capture and measure by capital" (Pitts, 2021, p.118). As consumers it can be argued that we are facilitating downtrodden workers to create excess value for the Capitalist and at the expense of their safety, health and overall quality of life.

It would seem that fast fashion workers and the society they live in are stuck in a capitalist lead cycle of repression and unequal distribution of the value they create. Kalkidan suggests that a way to challenge this is that the whole of society "better allocate value gained and costs experienced equally" (Barber, 2021, p.56). There is a predominant toxic cycle of global environmental injustice surrounding fast fashion whereby 2% of fashion workers are paid a

liveable wage (Segundo, 2020). In 2016 *Poverty to Power* found that out of “the top 100 economies of Earth, 31 were countries, 61 were corporations” (Barber, 2021, p.124). Is it right that corporations can be so wealthy when the majority of the people who do the hard labour creating the value are kept so poor? If brands incorporated the political value of civic responsibility into their core company values, then this could redistribute some of their wealth into the areas they have helped deplete. This could ensure that the manufacturing process they have created is not having a negative impact on the country’s resources through causing pollution and harm to communities and is instead supporting human rights and a liveable wage.

Most multi-million/ billion-dollar global brands have used slave-based labour predominantly BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) skilled women to generate wealth through their supply chain continuing exploitation (Barber, 2021). Marx argues that capitalism and race are entwined.

For black Marxism, capitalism is always in some respects ‘racial capitalism’ in so far as, through ongoing primitive accumulation, it accumulates through dispossession based on social difference the noted in the unequal differentiation of human value” cashing in on the “‘uneven life chances’ according to race (Pitts, 2021, p.106).

This is still so relevant today and shows that colonialism is still very much present in the extraction of labour from the Countries exploited by Capitalism. “Marx describes how the ‘Roman Slave was held by chains’ and the ‘wage labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads” (Pitts, 2021, p.107). The ceaseless drive for capitalist profits has led to the continual extraction of cheap labour and under value of the skills they possess. Anyango Mpinga (promotor of conscious consumption of fashion) says that if everyone took the decision to support the growth of one designer, artisan or worker from one of these communities then it would transform the industry completely (Barber, 2021). Wealth and value could be distributed more fairly by choosing to buy clothes from small independent companies, buy more locally made clothing to reduce global warming through air miles and support local businesses and manufacturers. Through spending a bit more on clothing we truly love a person will arguably value it more and keep it much longer. The chances are that if we invest more in clothing we will buy less too and it will be made of quality materials that have a value to the next person. When my mother was a child one of her jobs was to unpick outgrown or unused woollen jumpers and make neat reusable balls of wool. There was value in these garments, they had been made with ‘a labour of love’ and this value could be recycled into a new much cherished and valued item of clothing.

There are a lot of positive aspects of value. If we look at the personal values we have honesty, responsibility, loyalty for example, the Social Values are equally as heart warming with justice, equality, freedom and liberty to name just a few. Other ways to consider value are through political value which is civic responsibility, democracy and welfare. Then there is economic value which is money, just money (changingminds.org). It would be beneficial to most of the population if economic value could also incorporate some of the afore mentioned attributes, especially civic responsibility to protect those that predominantly created the value for others.

Through considering fast fashion it is clear there are many injustices surrounding the manufacture and wealth distribution and the supply chain it controls. The concept created by the capitalist and the fashion industry is that clothing is disposable and quickly and cheaply replaced at *low cost* so we feel encouraged to buy more. This needs prompt regulation by outside global alliances. There are millions of people being exploited through low wages, pollution caused and dangerous working conditions. There is also a global inequality and depravity created by colonialism and continued by capitalists which has remained unchanged for centuries. If left unchanged this will lead to planetary devastation. The ever-increasing consumption of goods and resources people are encouraged to buy, by the already rich multi-billion dollar corporations will inevitably result in us shopping ourselves and our planet to death. We need to value people and their skills as labourers (as Marx pointed out in his value theory) and give them the support they have earned. As a designer this has solidified my need to create objects which have been responsibly sourced through a transparent supply chain. Also, to incorporate as many different values as I can think of so the buyer will cherish my creation, thus keeping it out of landfill for years to come. I will forever be more responsible in my purchases from now on.

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Figure 1: Barber, A. (2021) *Slow Factory Foundation map of colonial routes and international trade routes today in Consumed*. London: Brazen.