Textile History and the Consumer Epidemic: An Anthropological Approach to Popular Consumption and the Mass Market

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Résumé

L'intérêt que présente l'histoire des textiles tient notamment à la façon dont a évolué la signification culturelle des textiles et à ses conséquences. L'auteur se propose de montrer ici, dans une perspective anthropologique, le rôle important que les propriétés culturelles ou symboliques des textiles ont joué dans la transformation des sociétés occidentales depuis le XVI^e siècle. Trois étapes mèneront à cette conclusion. Nous verrons en premier lieu que la modernité occidentale a été le fait tout autant d'une révolution de la consommation que d'une révolution industrielle; deuxièmement, que cette révolution de la consommation s'est produite sous la poussée de l'effort visant à attribuer de nouvelles significations culturelles à la culture matérielle et à l'habillement; enfin, que le processus d'attribution de nouvelles significations découle de nouvelles définitions des groupes sociaux et de l'individu. L'article résume les recherches existantes sur la question et propose de nouvelles avenues de recherche à explorer pour y donner suite.

Abstract

An issue central to the history of textiles is how and with what consequences the cultural significance of textiles has changed. In this paper I will use an anthropological perspective to argue that the cultural or symbolic properties of textiles have played an important role in the transformation of western societies from the sixteenth century onwards. This argument will be made in three parts: first, that the western modernity was driven just as much by a "consumer revolution" as an industrial one; second, that the consumer revolution was driven by the effort to invest material culture and clothing with new cultural meanings; and finally, that this process of meaning investment was driven by changing definitions of social groups and the individual. The paper will summarize past research that bears on this question and suggest new avenues of research that issue from it.

I have three objectives in this paper. The first is to delineate a key issue for textile history. The second is to review the literature that surrounds this issue. The third is to suggest some of the opportunities for future research that follow from the issue.

In all of this I speak as an anthropologist who has cultivated an interest in the history of the modern West, on the one hand, and a somewhat more detailed knowledge of the expressive properties of material culture, on the other. But let me state at the outset that no special claims are made of mastery in either field and no claims at all of being unusually "sighted" in understanding how the two fields intersect. What follows is experimental and uncertain. While my intention is to provoke, an anthropological view is more likely merely to annoy historians. There are many penalties for interdisciplinary trespass. The most obvious is the use of terms and the choice of questions that bear so little connection to those of the host field that they do almost nothing to illuminate the matter at hand. Since this paper promises as much irritation as illumination, I crave the reader's indulgence.

In all of this, material culture, and not just textiles, will be taken as the subject matter. When one talks about the cultural and symbolic properties of the material world, it is now customary to take in all the objects contained in this world. Actually, this tendency may be viewed with deep suspicion and may someday be remembered as wildly indiscriminant. Someday each object category within the material world will have its own body of theory. For the moment, however, there is no special shame in talking about

material culture in a single breath, and, with the special shamelessness of the interdisciplinary enthusiast, I make this my strategy here.

The Issue

The issue I wish to emphasize for the study of textile history is the question of why textiles and other consumer goods assumed new commercial and consumer significance from the early modern period onwards? Why did these goods become preoccupations? This is another way of asking the reasons for the movement of textiles, clothing and other consumer goods from the periphery of domestic life to its centre.

The topic has been examined by several scholars. Braudel bid us wonder whether a concern for changing fashions might not be one of the essential secrets of the development of the West.[1] McKendrick has asked us to see that a "consumer revolution" was the necessary companion of the industrial revolution and that there could not have been a transformation of supply without a corresponding transformation in demand.[2] Campbell, Mukerji, and Thirsk have also helped us to see that the new importance of consumer goods in the lives of early modern and subsequent Europeans was not an inevitable development in Western societies.[3] The members of these societies were not simply waiting for history to bless them with the opportunity to consume. In point of fact, all the objects, activities and consequences of the consumer revolution are quite strange cultural constructions. There is nothing that is intrinsically sensible, attractive, or inevitable about them. All had to be cultivated; all had to be learned. The modern desire for consumer goods is an historical artifact and a cultural invention.

The Literature

The literature has been extensive on this topic and gives a variety of solutions to the puzzle of the consumer revolution. A favourite explanation is that the entire exercise was driven by the universal forces of greed on the one hand and vanity on the other. In every member of every Western society from the early modern period onwards, there has lurked a little Samuel Gompers. We have always wanted "more". This argument holds that the consumer revolution had the effect of whetting the "Gompers" appetite even as it satisfied it. A dynamic was set in train that prevented any sense of sufficiency and drove the consumption system constantly to create new levels of demand. The vanity argument suggests a refinement of the greed argument. It suggests that what drives that little "Gompers" creature is the mirror in his hand. Human beings, by this account, are always profoundly moved by any opportunity to flatter themselves. The consumer revolution succeeded because it did precisely this. At the disposal of every ego, it put a collection of objects declaring the ego's beauty and importance.

It is, of course, a perilous business to suppose that the human condition is everywhere and always the same. Anthropologists have been trying to do it for a century or so, only to meet with constant disappointment. Greed and vanity have evaded even our most elaborate nets. And it will not do to say, well, alright then, not *all* traditions exhibit greed and vanity but Western society does. Then the game is up. This is to acknowledge that the notions of greed and flattery are the causes and therefore also the *consequences* of our own cultural traditions. They must, therefore, be made the object as much as the stuff of explanation. Certainly, they cannot simply be assumed to be "prime movers" of any historical change so significant as the consumer revolution.

No historian or anthropologist would explicitly accept "greed" and "vanity" as good explanations, but it is astonishing to see how often they insinuate them into the "fine print" of scholarship, which is to say these "explanations" are somewhat easier to dismiss than to guard against. Obviously the whats and the whys of desire are profoundly specific to individual times and places, to the particular historical and cultural context in place. To use these as explanations is to give up the task of analysis before it has begun.

A second explanation for the consumer revolution is the notion of status competition. Historians have been quick to follow Veblen's and Simmel's lead and to suppose that the consumer revolution has been driven by the effort to use the status symbolism of goods to claim a higher social status than one's neighbour.[4] Indeed scholars across the social sciences have been so enamoured of this argument that they have let it stand as the chief, and in many cases the exhaustive, account of consumer behaviour generally. People want goods in order to make (usually false) claims about where they rank in society. This is what made the eighteenth century experience an "epidemic" of consumer behaviour.[5] It is what makes us care so much about goods in the present day.

There is no doubt that this was an important factor. Status matters were most certainly at work in the consumer revolution. But it must also be observed that in its present form, this explanation begs all the important questions. How was rank defined? How was real mobility accomplished? How was fraudulent mobility undertaken? What were the properties of the object that made it an appropriate marker/claimer of rank? And the status explanation conceals still others: how did the subordinate class fashion its symbolic strategies to appropriate high-standing status markers? How did the superordinate class defend itself against these appropriations? Status is too often treated as a brute force, a psychological force. It is in fact a social construction, and its cultural categories and signs must all be specified and not assumed. This workhorse of the literature needs reassessment and perhaps retirement.

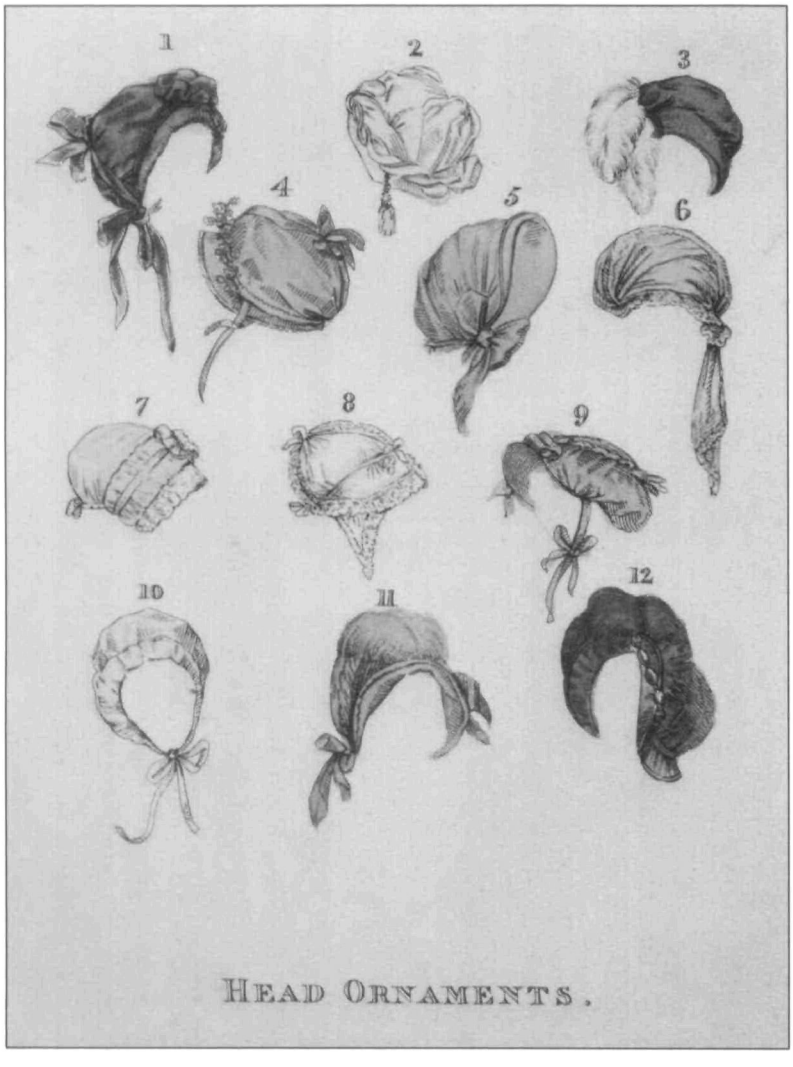

Fig. 1
1802 handbill advertising a new collection of caps and hats. The new volume and variety of consumer goods created pleasure and helped to perpetuate desire. (Courtesy of B. Lemire)
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A third explanation for the consumer revolution is pleasure. This has been considered by Scitovsky and Campbell.[6] The new volume and variety of consumer goods created pleasure and helped to perpetuate desire. According to Campbell, consumer goods are fantasies made material and accessible. They promise the consumer the opportunity to insinuate the pleasures of the imagination into the realities of the world. The difficulty is, of course, that the promise is a false one. The objects in question fail inevitably to realize imaginative pleasures in the world. And it is this, finally, that gives the desire occasioned by a consumer society its perpetual quality. When consumers suffer an inevitable disappointment with one consumer good, they move onto another. The cycle of hope and disappointment drives them from purchase to purchase and helps to perpetuate consumer desire. The cycle that drives the consumer also drives the consumer society.

The difficulty here is that we are forced to make an entire series of psychological assumptions for which we have no good historical evidence. Did consumer goods make fantasies material? Did they fail to make these fantasies live in the world? How and why did consumers continue to brave this disappointment and continue the endless purchase of things? And there is also the usual difficulty that Campbell's account forces the use of a psychological theory that gives no opportunity of explaining the historical particulars of consumer goods, consumer behaviour or the consumer revolution. One can only assert that the concern for pleasure drives the consumer and the consumer revolution. But it is impossible to explain why consumers cared more about one kind of textile or another, or why they cared more about textiles than plate or furniture.

A fourth explanation for the consumer revolution is the opportunities it created for hegemony, for new kinds of political-cultural control. Williams and Ewen have both suggested this as an explanation.[7] The consumer society became a place charged with new opportunities for false consciousness and manipulation. This is a kind of "bread and circuses" argument with the precise difference that in the place of bread and circuses there is a new variety of opportunities to distract and subtly coerce the attention of subordinate classes.

This argument has the difficulty of ascribing a consciousness of the semiotics of consumer goods for which there is no good historical record. We know for instance that

Elizabeth I was expert in using symbolism in her court and her clothing for more or less deliberate political effect. But we see no evidence that, in fact, any of the representatives of the ruling powers were anything but horrified by the new profusion of goods and choices and by the new kinds and degrees of presumption they made possible. At least in the English case, the consumer revolution looked like a challenge to privilege, not a new opportunity for its enlargement or protection. There is in fact apparent evidence that aristocratic classes were so bewildered and disarmed by the consumer revolution that they were moved to compromise one of their most effective means of status defence.[8]

A Cultural Approach

There is another approach to the consumer revolution. One might call it a "cultural" approach. This approach says that consumer goods are first of all the media for cultural meanings, that they give voice to the categories, principles and processes of culture. It says that virtually all of culture (all, that is to say, of its categories, principles and processes) finds expression through these meanings. Or, to put this another way, material culture makes all of culture material. This approach says that some part of textile history is the cause and consequence of the cultural character of consumer goods. People turned to textiles because these textiles were beginning to take on new and vital cultural meanings that could be used for a variety of performative purposes. To this extent, the cultural character of goods was a cause of the textile and consumer revolutions. But it is also true that textiles to which people turned were being transformed by the cultural intentions of the consumer, and to this extent the cultural character of textiles was a consequence of the revolution.[9]

Textiles in particular were key players in the consumer revolution precisely because of their expressive range. They could be used to express or to invent new notions of gender, class, age, domestic role and superordinate and subordinate relations. They were an opportunity to encode but also to rethink the fundamental categories, principles, processes and emotions of social life. The precise problem with "non-cultural" accounts of the consumer revolution is that they make one of the "meanings" of textiles the hero of the piece. Vanity, status, pleasure or power are all cultural meanings that could find expression through textiles. But it is not because textiles carried any one of them that it was so important to the consumer revolution. It was because textiles could carry these and any other cultural meanings with a range of social consequences that they figured so importantly in the consumer revolution.

There is too little room in this overview to give a closer rendering of the virtues, and the details, of the cultural account proposed here. Readers who want the proof for the rash assertions I have made here must consult the work in question. I wish to encourage the notion that textiles played a crucial role in the consumer revolution because of their special expressive properties. Their ability to carry and transform the entire range of cultural meanings enabled them to move from the periphery of social life to the centre. Because textiles were a medium and a manipulator of all cultural meanings, they entered into and helped create the consumer revolution.

Notes

1. Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life 1400–1800*, trans. Miriam Kochan (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973).
2. *Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
3. Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Chandra Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978).
4. Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1912).
5. Neil McKendrick et al., *Birth of a Consumer Society.*
6. Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy: An Inquiry into Human Satisfaction and Consumer Dissatisfaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Colin Campbell, *Romantic Ethic.*
7. Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976); Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
8. Grant McCracken, "The Diderot Effect," in *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to*

the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 118–129.

9. Grant McCracken, "The Making of Modern Consumption," in *Culture and Consumption*, 3–30.

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