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### **Fashion in the Time of Corona: What Can the Sociology of Fashion Reveal?**

Covid-19 and fashion seem to go hand in hand – or rather, glove-in-glove – in these precarious times.

The Covid-19 global situation has many sartorial fashion elements, some more obvious and reported, others more hidden and under-reported. These elements encompass both macro- and micro-levels of social life, haute couture and mass market clothing, production and consumption, raw materials and distribution networks, rich and poor people, short-term and long-term trends and consequences, and winners and losers. The fashion-related aspects of the crisis are simultaneously economic, cultural-aesthetic and political, local and national, as well as global and globalizing. A fashion sociologist's task in the time of Corona is therefore this: to recognise and record such elements, and to analyse their complex interconnections.

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An initial snapshot: In February 2020, French designer Marine Serre's collection was shown in Paris Fashion Week with a feature that would become extraordinarily on-trend in the weeks to follow: the [models wore face masks](#). This was unintentionally timely. Serre had covered models' faces before, and she had sold 'anti-pollution masks' as part of her accessories.

Yet, there is a law in force in France – and various other countries – that bans the full covering of the face, a ban that has been considered by the United Nations to be [disproportionately targeting Muslim women](#). The ban has been defended by French officials, claiming that visibility of the face is necessary for 'living together' (and the ECtHR has [upheld this claim as legitimate](#)). But with the Covid-19 pandemic, the republic cannot '[live with an uncovered face](#)' any more. As [face masks are becoming a new fashion](#) in Paris and elsewhere in France, deep lines of inequality and differential treatment as regards individuals' sartorial choices are being revealed.

Another snapshot: In March/April 2020, Finland's newly-elected Prime Minister Sanna Marin was featured in the fashion magazines [Vogue Britain](#) and [Vogue US](#), interviews with her having been conducted before the Covid-19 crisis spread to Finland. One of the dresses the PM wore was made by the Finnish sustainable design company Uhana, who by this time had been forced to close their shops in Helsinki and Tampere and operate online only. The publicity associated with the young and female PM wearing their garment in high-profile international fashion venues increased the company's international orders. But this happened in a time when the company also had problems concerning [access to fabrics](#) which they usually order from Italy.

The earliest centre of the European iteration of the pandemic, the northern Italian fashion business had been in trouble already before the full government-imposed lockdown, due to the rapid collapse of their Asian market. A total of one third of all Italian luxury fashion production [is sold in China](#). It has also been suggested that the virus may have been brought to Italy in the

first place by [Chinese factory workers](#) returning from the Lunar New Year celebrations that took place in late January. Northern Italian fashion manufacturing has for years been run largely by Chinese workers in Chinese-owned factories, who profit from the prestige of the [‘Made in Italy’](#) label and associated global advertising.

One factor that Covid-19 has exposed about the workings of global fashion production networks is their vulnerability, due both to over-dependence on China and also to highly complicated supply chains. The world’s [four biggest garment manufacturing countries](#) are China, Bangladesh, Vietnam and India. Readymade garment production constitutes a massive 16% of the national economy of Bangladesh, worth \$34 billion per year. Meanwhile, [70% of fabrics](#) used in Bangladesh’s garment industry comes from China. At the same time, Chinese consumers not being able to travel and shop has [dramatically cut sales](#) in European and North American fashion-oriented cities like Milan and New York which are highly dependent on Chinese customers. The consequent halting of orders and factory closures hurt the most vulnerable people operating within the fashion industry, namely the factory workers whose income is already extremely low, and who often have no financial security or alternative sources of income. Some clothing brands are also reported to be making [unreasonable demands](#) on manufacturers, delaying payments or cancelling orders for garments that have already been made, thus pushing the financial consequences of the pandemic onto those who are already in weaker positions in the globalized supply chain.

So, there now seems to be marked *intensification* of existing inequalities within the global fashion system because of the Covid-19 crisis. Those who were already deprived, are now either losing their incomes altogether, or in some situations are directly exposed to the threat of Covid-19 itself, in order to continue with their (deeply exploitative) labour. For example, the warehouse staff working for major fashion retailers, such as UK-based companies Pretty Little Thing and Boohoo, have complained that with the strict work targets imposed upon them, and with rapidly increasing online orders of fashion items that were made before the crisis and are stored in warehouse facilities, it is [impossible for them to observe physical distancing rules](#) to protect themselves and their co-workers. Meanwhile, wealthy and established haute couture and high-street brands alike are turning to face mask production as a means of survival, and are also gaining positive visibility by [donating masks](#) to struggling healthcare systems.

There is also every chance of further *escalation* of Covid-19 related problems in the future. In addition to the vulnerability of fashion producers who are in a state of economic crisis, there are other interconnected fields of production that are likely to suffer too. For example, cotton is the second most common fibre in global textile production, and it counts for up to one [third of world apparel consumption](#). Your ‘cheap’ T-Shirt bought from a chain store will likely be made of cotton, picked by some of the world’s most exploited workers. The [biggest global producers of cotton](#) are China, India, the USA, Pakistan, Brazil, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Australia, Turkmenistan and Mexico. Given that in the Northern hemisphere, where the majority of these countries are located, the cotton harvest is due to take place from July onwards, Covid-19 will almost certainly have a great impact on that harvest. China, India and the USA already seriously struggle under the conditions created by the virus. [Pakistan](#) is predicted to be hit hard by it in the near future. [Turkey’s](#) already heavily indebted economy could face extreme crisis conditions due to the strain the virus will put on public funding of healthcare as well as on the economy more generally. It is true that Turkmenistan – where forced labour is widely used for cotton picking – has not reported any Covid-19 cases yet, but such statistics are [hardly](#)

[convincing or reliable](#), and so the situation there is likely to be eventually just as bad as in the other cotton-producing locations.

The global fashion system as currently constituted will likely be substantially subjected to *transformation* by the pandemic and its consequences. In this process, there will be winners and losers, as different sorts of actors accommodate to the new situation, both in the shorter and longer terms. Among the short-term transformations is the organising of [fashion events online](#). In this development, the winners are clear: companies and individuals specialising in the necessary technology and 3D art. Arguably, this is also an environmentally friendly development, because of the reduced air travel that taking fashionista participation online entails. But the environmental consequences of changes to haute couture practices will be limited. It is cheap, mass market ‘fast fashion’ that is responsible for a great deal of the pollution that the complex garment production chain creates. Indeed the fashion business produces [up to 10% of world’s pollution](#) as a whole. Current closures and part-closures of garment factories may be environmentally good news in some ways, but this also destroys the livelihoods of vulnerable factory workers across Asia and other regions. The winners in this regard seem to be, once again, in the wealthier parts of the world, while the losers are concentrated in the poorer areas.

A more long-term change that the fashion industry is likely to be forced to make is reducing its dependency on China. This involves finding new suppliers for many parts of the supply chain. In a rather utopian scenario, the consequences of Covid-19 would create a situation involving increases in localised clothes production in different locations around the world, thus dividing the environmental costs more equally. Currently the poorer producing countries bear the consequences of richer countries’ lifestyles very [disproportionately](#). Such changes would mean that the prices of garments would rise everywhere. This in turn would contribute to within-country inequalities in terms of access to clothes. It is easy to recommend pricier ‘sustainable fashion’ to everyone, but the relatively high price of such garments restricts their accessibility to different audiences, with the lower classes facing steep increase in the costs of their clothing. Nevertheless, it seems inevitable that the fashion system’s transformations in both the near and more distant future need to answer not only to the dilemmas created by Covid-19, but also to the much more persistent problem of environmental challenges and climate change.

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Is there a future for fashion?

Arguably, fashion has always been about inequalities. The whole point of fashion is the demarcation of group boundaries, and the indication and creation of social distinctions. This side of fashion has also traditionally been the main focal point of those sociologists who have studied fashion during the last 120 years or so, since the time of the pioneering figures like Veblen and Simmel.

What the post-pandemic future brings for fashion remains to be seen. We might see a more sustainable industry after Covid-19 – but who precisely can afford its offerings? Or we might see even more inequality and exploitation, following the global economic crisis that is produced by the pandemic and will last long after it has come under control. But the good news is that fashion sociologists will be there, observing and analysing – preferably wearing carefully chosen face masks and beautifully styled gloves, in the interests of protecting us all.

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