

Karl Marx: Fashion and Capitalism

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Introduction

Given Wilson's comment that 'fashion is the child of capitalism' (2003: 13), this chapter shows how Marx's rich conceptual framework can produce a deeper critical understanding of the origins and dynamics of fashion, socially, culturally and materially. For just like the capitalist system which spawned it, fashion is 'double faced' (Wilson, 2003: 13); a source of both pleasure and pain, expression and exploitation.

A Glimpse of Marx's Life and a Lesson in the Symbolic Power of Dress

In contrast to the grinding poverty which scarred his later life, Karl Marx was born into the relative comfort of a middle class home in the German cathedral town of Trier in the Rhineland in 1818. The son of a Jewish lawyer who converted to Protestantism to escape anti-Semitism, Marx studied law at Bonn in 1835 and philosophy at Berlin University a year later. Despite completing his doctoral thesis on classical Greek philosophy in 1841, aged only twenty-three, Marx dropped his plans to follow an academic career. Instead, he dedicated his life to studying capitalism and to providing the theoretical underpinnings for a grand project: the emancipation of society by ridding it of the suffering caused by the class inequalities and exploitation which prevails under capitalism (Callinicos, 1983). Under this system, or 'mode of production' (Marx, 1976: 3), goods are produced to be sold as commodities to create profit for capitalists, that is, those who own the 'means of production' (the raw materials and manufacturing machinery). For Marx, then, capitalism does not primarily seek to meet the needs of the workers who make these goods. Rather, their 'labour power' is sold to, controlled and exploited by these same capitalists in return for the wages necessary to subsist. Meanwhile, workers themselves are transformed into consumers forced to buy back the things they make at a premium. This exploitative system of production characterizes capitalism and is central to the development of fashion, as we will later see.

Casual journalism, Marx's main source of income after leaving university, was poorly and erratically paid, forcing him to regularly pawn his overcoat to buy food and other essentials for himself and his family. Frequent trips to the pawnbrokers meant he 'knew the

value of his coat' (Stallybrass, 1998: 203) as a commodity or means of exchange. However, giving up his coat for cash also brought him face to face with one of the most important aspects of fashion: its capacity to signify social status, real or otherwise, 'actual or contrived' (Finkelstein, 1991: 128). Without his coat Marx was unable to study, since 'the reading room [of the British Library] did not accept just anyone off the streets, and a man without an overcoat [...] was just anyone. Without it, Marx was [...] not fit to be seen.' (Stallybrass, 1998: 187). Thus, Marx experienced first-hand the symbolic power of dress as a means to create an image or impression of social identity and to 'individuate oneself in the midst of society' (Marx, 1973: 84).

Hegel, Feuerbach and Marx: The Road to Historical Materialism

What made Marx such an exceptional thinker within the history of western thought was his frustration with the cerebral fixation of many of his contemporaries. As he writes, 'philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways—the point is to change it' (Marx, 1974: 123). As a student Marx was drawn into a bohemian circle of radical thinkers who were heavily influenced by, yet increasingly critical of, the work of Hegel, the most important philosopher of the day. The 'Young Hegelians', as they were known, still basked in the intellectual glow of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, which stressed that ideas, reason and thought – as opposed to God, nature and supernatural forces – were decisive in understanding history and transforming society. They gathered to drink and discuss ideas at the Berlin Doctors' club (Gonzalez, 2005), attacking the oppressiveness of the Prussian (now German) society of which they were part.

In Hegel's work Marx found the seeds of his own theory of history: 'historical materialism'. Hegel (1975) had argued that the development of society and the ideas that shaped it, went through distinct stages. Any change from one type of society to another did not come about gradually, but through ruptures and antagonisms rooted in conflicting ideas about how people understood the world. Thus, for Hegel, progress could only come about if this contradiction in ideas was resolved by a move to a new revolutionary way of thinking, a synthesis which provided a more complete and higher level of understanding of the world. He argued that the Prussian state had emerged from such a struggle between those who believed God or supernatural forces shaped history, and enlightenment thinkers for whom everything could be explained rationally.

However, Marx's 'historical materialism' saw social change as arising not from contradictions in the *ideas* in society, but in its *material* conditions of life and the way in

which labour was organised. Marx argued that the conflict over ownership, control of production and its product was the central contradiction in capitalist society. It created distinct groups or, in his terms, classes, and resulted in a struggle between them for control of labour power. As he famously put it: ‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeymen, [and worker or proletarian and capitalist], in a word oppressor and oppressed.’ (Marx and Engels, 1998: 3). Here he was also influenced by the work of Hegel’s biggest critic, Feuerbach, who insisted material life shaped consciousness. Feuerbach’s ideas offered an alternative to Hegel’s, whose concept of labour as only of the mental kind made him succumb to ‘the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought’ (Marx, 1993: 101). For Marx, who was above all interested in change and how to achieve it, Feuerbach’s materialism was problematic in that it conceived of human nature, thought and behaviour as an unalterable essence.

Thus, it was by both drawing on and critiquing the ideas of these thinkers that Marx developed his ‘historical materialist’ perspective. He argued that human nature did not remain static, because labour and its effects distinguished our ‘species being’ from other animals. For Marx, labour changes human nature itself because our active interaction with the material world through labour reshapes our consciousness. At the same time, through our ‘material production and intercourse we alter along with the actual world our thinking and its products’ (Marx, 1975: 37). According to Marx, then, it was the contradictions of class relations, the control over labour and its products by a small group or class under capitalism, which prevented the full realisation of our ‘species being’ or creative labouring powers. Today this loss of control over our labour or ‘alienation’ as he termed it (2023[1844]) alongside the drive to profit embodied in carbon/fossil fuel capitalism threatens the very survival of the planet (Bellamy Foster 2009; Royale 2021). For Marx for whom labour was ‘the process by which human beings...mediated, regulated and controlled’ their relationship with nature, such alienation led not only to ‘the robbery of the worker but of the soil too,’ (Marx 1990 [1867], p.638) leading to an ever more damaging metabolic ‘rift’ with nature. (Ibid 1991[1894], p.949) By contrast for him and his friend and collaborator Frederick Engels, under ‘Communism’ (the highest form of society as they conceived) it - the production process would be transparent and sustainable because labour would be democratically controlled and organised on the basis of social need not private profit. If production was socialised in this way, as Marx wrote, ‘the unity of living and active humanity with the natural inorganic conditions of our metabolic exchange with nature’ (1993 [1857], p. 489) would be achieved.

In establishing such possibilities, Marx, supported by Engels, became the primary theorist of revolutionary Socialism. Via seminal texts like *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) he argued that only when the working class takes power by destroying the existing capitalist state, will the whole of society be freed from the inequality and suffering caused by class relations, 'alienation', and the exploitation of labour and nature

Capitalism, from Dress to Fashion

Elizabeth Wilson (2003) links fashion's emergence from tentative beginnings in court society (Elias, 1978) to the rise of capitalism about four or five hundred years ago. She argues that the symbolic use of adornment to indicate group belonging or social identification – be it to a tribe or subculture, gender or class, whether through clothing, jewellery, make-up, tattoos or piercings – is found in all cultures. But that is dress, not fashion. Rather, fashion 'is dress in which the key feature is rapid and continual changing of styles' (Wilson, 2003: 4-5).

Though it does not discuss dress or fashion specifically, Marx' and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* documents the social milieu in which fashion developed as a wider social practice. It paints a picture of a world in which change and impermanence or ephemerality, continually trump continuity, stability and tradition. This meant, as *The Communist Manifesto* also vividly demonstrates, a transformation from a society in which social life characterised by 'fixed, frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices' was 'swept away' and replaced by capitalism and a modern urban society where, as Marx and Engels famously put it, 'all that is solid melts into air' (1998: 38).

Amongst *The Communist Manifesto*'s many memorable vignettes is its portrayal of the collapse of the old certainties derived from a divinely ordained social order, whose social or class relations were determined by a fixed hierarchy from King to noble to peasant. Marx and Engels wrote,

The bourgeoisie has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned [all of this] in the icy waters of egotistical calculation. (1998: 37)

The Communist Manifesto thus dramatically depicts 'the shock of the new' (Hughes, 1991) and the impact of modernity; a new form of society in which the possibility of social mobility

and the concept of the self and individual identity were ascendant. Moreover, the disturbance of class relations that created the conditions for this mobility was amplified by the fact that the bourgeois class, as Marx and Engels argued, ‘subjected the country to the rule of the towns’ (Marx and Engels, 1998: 40). Possessed of a surplus income – the profits of labour exploitation – some of which was spent on consumption, the bourgeois class competed on their favoured public urban terrain with the old rural aristocratic noble class. Class leadership was then contested sartorially, as well as economically and politically. As Slater puts it, ‘new money buys landed estates, wears the clothes of court and “society”, it can indulge in the leisure pursuits of the aristocracy’ (1997: 70). According to both Wilson (2003) and Entwistle (2023) a lack of certainty ensued about who was who in class terms. This was felt most keenly as strangers passed strangers on the streets. Such ambiguity about identity in class terms especially fed a heightened sense of the importance of dress as social currency, a means of expressing, and playing with, revealing and concealing, social identity—hence the symbolic weight of Marx’s coat. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the early capitalist city was for Wilson the ‘crucible of contradiction’ (2003: 13), the space where the fashioning of individual identity emerged in a maelstrom of urban encounters set in motion by capitalism’s disruption of older social relations.

Only in this new competitive social context could dress become fashion. Its change or endless mutability developed through what has become known as ‘trickle down’ diffusion, or the spread of fashion from ‘superior’ to ‘inferior’ classes (Veblen, 1899). In place of the relative permanence of feudal dress codes established by occupation – whether one was a ‘biscuit, knife or stationery seller’ (Wilson, 2003: 24-25) and policed by ‘sumptuary laws’ governing who wore what in terms of fabric and colours (Craik, 2009) – a competitive cycle of fashionable emulation and symbolic ‘distinction’ developed (Bourdieu, 1986; see also chapter 16 of this book). Entwistle argues that the struggle for dominance between subordinate and superior classes ‘was fought out obliquely less with swords than through symbols of which dress was one of the most significant’ (2000: 106). Just as the aristocracy attempted to maintain their identity against the new bourgeois class, whose consumption at first mimicked their own, the bourgeoisie in turn developed a more restrained style of dress, for men at least: the sober frock coat and dark coloured suit, which attempted to distinguish them both from the aristocracy and the working class (Breward, 1999). Without understanding the transformation from feudalism to capitalism it is difficult to explain this sartorial class struggle and why both fashion’s dynamic of change and the tension between the individual self and the social emerged. Fashion, in class terms especially, as Simmel argues

(see also chapter 4), became the means to subjectively negotiate contradictory impulses to fit in and stand out, enabling both ‘social adaptation’ and ‘differentiation’ (1971: 296).

Producing and Consuming ‘Fashion for All’?

If we switch our focus to the material dimensions of fashion under capitalism, and more specifically to how clothes came to be produced and consumed under the capitalist system, the overall picture is one of a significant but uneven and contradictory shift away from a feudal mode of production. Under that slow-moving system, self and small-scale artisanal provisioning of goods predominated. Cloth and garment manufacture were ‘cottage industries’ involving shop-based tailors and journeymen and seamstresses or dressmakers (Rouse, 1989; Tarrant, 1994; Lemire, 1997). The contrast between this and today’s large-scale production of fashion as retail commodities – garments that are ‘ready to wear’ and available off-the-peg in global fashion chains, on-line and off – is both striking and yet, in some important respects, misleading.

The era of rapidly changing ‘fast fashion’ (Sull and Turconi 2008) inaugurated in the early 2000s meant seductive images of the latest celebrity or catwalk styles, spread virally through internet and social media sites. Once picked up by global fashion brands these multiples quickly turned them into readymade garments for sale to consumers. Thus Zara’s use of digital technology in design, stock control, buying and logistics processes cut the lead time between identifying a fashion and getting it into shops to just a few weeks (Edwards, 2011). From 2019 onwards as lockdowns in response to the global Covid pandemic forced many shops to close and brands reliant on physical consumption and customer ‘footfall’ in High Street stores struggled and, in some cases, such as that of the Arcadia group collapsed (their once market leading fashion brand Topshop has been bought up by ASOS [As Seen On Screen]), exclusively online fast-fashion brands such as Boohoo in the UK and Shein in China further accelerated or ‘turbo charged’ this turn-over of styles (Eley and Olcott 2021). By June 2021 using a combination of ‘Test and Repeat’ manufacture, AI design and low cost rapid air-freight, Shein captured a third of the US fast fashion market seducing its target demographic of 16-24 year olds with no fewer than 6,000 new items a day (ibid).

However, as recently as the mid-nineteen fifties ‘it was still normal to make your own clothes or have them made for you’ (Rouse, 1989: 244). Surprisingly, then, despite the spread of ready-to-wear commercial fashion at first to the bourgeoisie and then to the middle class at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries (Rouse, 1989; Entwistle, 2000; Wilson, 2003), for much of the population a pattern of fashionable

consumption outside of the ready-to-wear sector remained long after the wider demise of feudalism. Unlike today's ecologically damaging culture of throwaway fast fashion, clothes in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were kept for as long as possible, repaired, unpicked, cleaned, reused and adapted not just as second hand but as third-, fourth-, fifth-, sixth-hand and more (Lemire, 1997). Moreover, right up to the early twentieth century the second-hand trade provided the main point of access for readymade clothing for all but the middle, bourgeois and aristocratic classes (Rouse, 1989; Tarrant, 1994).

There was then a contradiction between the emergence and spread of a fashion culture in the early capitalist period, and the exclusion of the majority of the working class from fashionable ready-to-wear until the second half of the twentieth century, when retail fashion genuinely became 'fashion for all' (Rouse, 1989: 278). This was fundamentally an issue of the cost of new readymade garments. A typist who earned 'about £66 per annum in 1910' and had a budget for clothing of about '£5 per annum' could not afford to be fashionably dressed, only 'respectably' so (Rouse, 1989: 278). Marx and Engels argue in *The Communist Manifesto* that the potential productivity of the 'forces of production' was limited or 'fettered' by the class based social relations of capitalism, which created conditions of scarcity in what should have been an era of plenty. This argument is powerfully apposite in the case of fashion. Until the rise of trade unions at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century forced increases in pay in the developed countries, off-the-peg fashion was simply beyond most working class people's pockets. Fashion, understood in Barthes' sense of a rapid cycle of stylistic obsolescence where the rate of 'replacement exceeds dilapidation' (Barthes, 1998: 297-298; see also chapter 9 in this book) with commercially provisioned ready-to-wear as its primary source, was out of reach. This exclusive history of consumption is mirrored by the reality of fashion production, which has not shaken off its pre-industrial origins because it remains centred on an archaic assembly process known as CMT (Cut, Make and Trim). Indeed, CMT uses technology and techniques that have scarcely changed since the invention of the sewing machine one hundred and seventy years ago—the time in which Marx developed his critique of capitalism.

Labour, 'Species Being', and the Duality of Adornment

As indicated earlier, Marx argued that capitalism was a system based on the exploitation of workers by capitalists. Understanding how this exploitation works to extract what he called 'surplus value' can help us to comprehend the contradictions between fashion production and consumption. More specifically, it can explain why fashion in the twenty-first century

continues to heavily exploit the labour of the garment workers who produce the clothes most of us wear today. Such toil, little different to the horrific sweated conditions endured by garment workers in Marx's day, persists because if fashion is to continue as a mass consumer phenomenon it must be made and sold cheaply.

Marx's concept of labour as 'species being' is vital to understanding fashion. To take one example, without the social labour involved in each of the forty-plus manufacturing processes from cotton harvest to retail display, off-the-peg cotton chinos – a menswear fashion staple – could not exist (Jarnow and Dickerson, 1996). Some writers have seen Marx's focus on labour as crudely materialistic (Sahlins, 1976; Baudrillard, 1981, 1988), narrowly focused on production, regardless of the quality and aesthetic dimensions of what was produced so long as it had some functionality. This misperception has been reinforced by the fact that 'Communism' produced the infamous Trabant car in East Germany, and the homogenising uniform of the Mao suit in China. The reasons why these states turned out such 'wonders' are too complex to go into here, except to say they evidence the alienation or lack of democracy and control by workers in both countries, and each state's behaviour was 'state capitalist' rather than communist (Cliff, 1988). As such they would have been an anathema to Marx, who argued not for state ownership and the drive for profit, but for workers' democratic control of labour to serve peoples' wants and needs.

At the heart of Marx's work is his richly capacious concept of labour as our active creative 'species being' - our conscious self-reflective labour - the thing which distinguishes human nature from all other species. Though he praises capitalism for developing this productive potential, Marx attacks 'the bourgeois epoch' (1998: 38) as a world in which a fantastic wealth of commodities is created by exploiting the many, whilst their enjoyment is restricted to the few. For Marx, then, consumption is always marred by the fact that under capitalist social relations markets determine access to commodities on the basis of access to money or credit (Fine and Leopold, 1993). For Marx, this contradiction, along with 'alienation' or 'estrangement' (Marx, 2023 [1844]) from our creative labouring powers, could only be overcome when the limited or 'fettering' role of class relations and the private ownership and control of production was swept away.

Marx's appreciation of the enormous potential of labour to create all manner of stunning things, including dress, emerges strongly across his writing. It is at its clearest when in *Capital Volume One* (1867) he writes: 'spiders conduct operations which resemble weavers', and bees construct honeycomb cells, 'but what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in their mind before constructing it in

wax' (Marx, 1990: 284). Elsewhere, he writes that unlike animals, who 'produce one-sidedly' to meet 'immediate needs', humans 'produce universally [...] even when we are free from physical need and truly produce only in freedom from need' (Marx, 2023 [1844]) For Marx, then, labour as our 'species being' involves conscious design and aesthetic creation beyond necessity. It is this quality of the things we create that makes our production uniquely cultural, since, as he puts it, human beings alone 'form objects in accordance with the laws of beauty' (Marx, Ibid.).

Whilst these words jar with assessments of Marx as a crude materialist or 'productivist', they suggest that the very quality of fashion, the thing which makes it such a powerful cultural force, is the duality of adornment. In *Capital Volume One* he defines commodities as things that engage both wants of the 'stomach', that is, bodily or practical needs, and wants of the 'fancy' or the imagination (Marx, 1990: 125). Fashion, then, is a play of form with and over function: we do not just wear shoes for their utility or for protection, but we wear specific styles of shoes, whether loafers, brogues, boots or trainers, for social, symbolic and aesthetic reasons.

Anticipating much more recent critical work on fashion's cultures of production Marx's focus was not just on the creative, aesthetic and playful possibilities of things in the abstract. (For key instances of such contemporary critical work see Braham, 1997; Fine and Leopold, 1993; Phizacklea, 1989 Entwistle, 2000 and 2023, Appelbaum and Bonacich 2000; more recently Hoskyns 2014 and, most clearly drawing on his theoretical framework, Mezzadri 2017). Marx was most resolutely interested in examining how human labour was systematically exploited to produce commodities. He wanted to understand the contradictions this created, especially under capitalism. In the case of fashion, Marx could see its contradictions not just in his personal experience and tribulations with his coat. He focused on something far worse; the question of why the production of fashion took such a cruel, inhuman form—a question still urgent today. In *Capital Volume One* he examines the textile industry, tailoring and other forms of garment manufacture, to bring home the realities of the exploitation of labour needed to produce fashion's finery. Here, as elsewhere, he argues that 'alienation' meant labour produced what he called 'marvels and beauty beyond necessity', but always at the price of 'deformity' and suffering for the worker (Marx, 1963 cited in Molyneaux, 2012: 12-13).

Similarly, Frederick Engels, whose father owned a textile mill in Manchester, had already documented the poverty and misery that arose from the production of all kinds of commodities in England's industrial cities in the 1840s. Pointing to the '15,000 mostly young,

women seamstresses' who worked, slept and ate in their workshop premises, labouring for fifteen to eighteen hour days, he wrote: 'it is a curious fact that the production of precisely those articles which serve the personal adornment of the ladies of the bourgeoisie involves the saddest consequences for the health of the workers' (2009: 12). Outraged by the human cost of fashion's cycle of stylistic change, Marx attacked its 'murderous caprices', highlighting the tragedy of Walkley, a twenty-year old milliner who 'worked uninterruptedly for 26 ½ hours' and died of overwork (Marx, 1990: 365). Understandably, given these circumstances, Marx hoped that the invention of the 'decisively revolutionary' sewing machine would transform the production of garments through the use of modern industrial methods (Marx, 199: 443). But Marx's hopes did not materialise and the sewing machine intensified the exploitative pressure on garment workers rather than alleviating it. Understanding why this was so, and why no other major advances have been made in the technology used to make clothes in the CMT process, is the key to understanding fashion's contradictory or ambivalent status. Today, we still need a Marxist perspective to understand the Jekyll and Hyde tendency of the fashion industry.

Surplus Value, Sweating and Competition

To explain how 'surplus value' or profit is created through the social relations between capitalist and worker, Marx developed a basic formula for capitalism, or more precisely capitalist exchange: *M-C-M* (1990: 248-57). It explains how the capitalist or bourgeoisie as the class who owned the means of production made money from the working class who sold their 'labour power' in exchange for the wages they needed to live or reproduce themselves. Taking this process step-by-step, Marx argued that the capitalist advances value in the form of money, *M*, to purchase the value of 'labour power', *C*, as a commodity from the worker in the form of wages. But crucially the value created by the worker's total labour in any given time – the second '*M*' of the equation – always exceeds that invested or paid out by the capitalist. Thus, the workers receive only a portion of the total value they create, a wage based on what Marx argued was 'socially necessary labour time' or SNLT. For Marx, labour, or more precisely the SNLT taken to make things, is the basis of the value of all commodities. It represents the time needed on average, given socially typical levels of tools and techniques, for workers to create enough value to be paid the wages necessary to live and to return to work fed, rested, clothed and entertained. For Marx, then, the core value of any commodity comes from the amount or measure of SNLT taken to make it. His 'labour theory of value' means that if a worker produces enough value to pay for their subsistence in four hours, for

the rest of an eight hour day they worked for nothing, creating four hours 'surplus value' for the capitalist for whom they worked. 'Surplus value', then, is the excess value that the worker creates and the capitalist receives over and above the value of the worker's wages. In money terms this value is realised as profit for the capitalist when the commodity is sold.

This is the general picture. When we turn to examine fashion production in particular, it has specific characteristics ensuring that the amount of wages paid to the garment worker – the value of their SNLT – was and still is very low. Historically, the first ready-to-wear clothes were manufactured using a continuation of the old feudal 'cottage industry' system mentioned above. Known as 'the putting-out system' (Hobsbawm cited in Lemire, 1997: 55), this pre-industrial system of manufacture involved merchants or other middlemen supplying fibres to spinners, thread to weavers or cloth to seamstresses and tailors. They worked these materials respectively up into thread, cloth or garments, for which they were paid a set amount. In this system workers initially had some power, because they sold the product of their labour, not their 'labour power' as a commodity. In the case of artisan hand loom weavers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the control of their labour was lost as large-scale mechanisation cut the time taken to make cloth. As a result, the value of the 'labour power' that went into textile manufacture quickly collapsed, destroying the livelihood of these weavers who could no longer compete by selling the products of their labour and were forced instead to sell their 'labour power' itself cheaply.

In the case of garments, Marx argued that the need to raise profitability by cutting the time taken to make clothes so as to reduce the value of 'labour power' took a different form. In *Capital Volume One* Marx quotes 'The Children's Employment Commission' (1864), who reported: 'when work passes through several hands, each takes its share of profits [...], so the pay which reaches the workwoman is miserably disproportioned' (1990: 695). For Phizacklea (1989) the gradual development of the existing system of 'putting out' or dispersed manufacture by a network of home and small scale producers, meant there was little incentive to innovate technically. There was no need to invest capital on expensive machines as long as a pool of cheapened women's, child, migrant and later global labour, was readily available for exploitation. This is what Marx termed capital's 'reserve army' (1999: 781) and its significance has not diminished today.

Crucially, it is Marx who explains how and why 'sweating' was and is central to the garment making chain. He argues it has been shaped by the role of 'parasitic middle men' or 'jobbers' (Leopold, 1992), who profit from 'the difference between the price of labour capitalist "manufacturers" paid and the price workers received' (Marx, 1990: 695). Moreover,

the 'interposition' of these middlemen as agents encouraged payment by 'piece wages', as they intervened between stores and larger factory based manufacturers and garment workers themselves, either at home or in smaller workshops and factories (Marx, 1990). Though appearing as a continuation of 'putting out', that is, buying the 'product' of these outworkers labour and not their actual 'labour power', in reality 'piece rates' and their gradual renegotiation by capitalist merchant middlemen or 'jobbers' (Leopold, 1992) forced wage labour into garment production wherever it took place. 'Fixing the rate', or the amount paid for each garment or piece of garment, Marx contended, removed any meaningful control over the labour process by the producer. It ensured 'the quality and intensity of the work which went into [making clothes] was controlled by its very form' of payment (Marx, 1990: 695). 'Piece wages' therefore raised the level of surplus value extracted, further worsening exploitation. Indeed, whilst pay exceeded the average for some workers who worked flat out to make more garments or pieces, they 'lowered average' pay overall (Marx, 1990: 697), since cutting the time taken to make each garment is a form of self defeat as it reduces the value of 'labour power'.

In general terms, then, agents and subcontractors reduced the value of 'labour power' to the barest minimum, because of the pressure to cut garment production times through 'piece wages'. It not only enhanced the profits of these middle men, but also encouraged further 'sub-letting of labour', subcontracting or 'sweating', to produce enough garments to earn a living wage (Marx, 1990). This meant the home or small producer gave out the work to family members, including children, to try and make more garments to compensate for the fall in the value of each. Finally, Marx argued that the size and cheapness of 'fixed' capital – the sewing machine when it finally arrived in the eighteen fifties (Marx, 1990: 603) – encouraged competition between small producers, since the machines were relatively cheap and small enough to be used anywhere. Thus, he pointed to the competition which 'raged in direct proportion to the number and in inverse proportion to the size of rival capitals' or producers (Marx, 1990: 777). Identified by Marx a century and half ago, these exploitative and competitive dynamics meant, and continue to mean, a constant entry into and exit from the market for fashion manufacture (Leopold, 1992). Today, in Bangladesh, Vietnam, Myanmar and other developing countries, small garment making firms continually underbid each other competing for contracts from the agents who subcontract work for large global retailers such as Walmart, Primark, The Gap and H&M. Whilst they have lucratively outsourced and minimised all the risks and costs associated with garment manufacture, clothing workers continue to pay the highest price for inflated corporate profits and 'cheap' clothes.

Typically, then during the Covid 19 Pandemic the social cost of online ‘turbo fast-fashion’ was borne most heavily by its predominantly global majority workforce. Abused as fashion’s ‘reserve army’ of labour, workers casually employed with few if any employment rights they were dismissed at will. In the Global South lockdowns meant a catastrophic collapse in orders with millions of garment workers ‘laid off’ and forced to face destitution (Kelly 2020). Meanwhile in the North migrant and other vulnerable under- and undocumented workers faced ‘super-exploitation’ too (Smith 2018 and Suwandi 2019). As the campaign organisation ‘Labour behind The Labour’ (2019) revealed with scant Covid protection and for illegally low wages garment workers, most often recent or older migrants, sweated to meet the surge in demand for online fashion brands such as Boohoo—boosting their profits in what came to be known as the scandal of Leicester’s ‘dark factories’ (O’Connor 2018).

Commodity Fetishism and Fashion

Before any other writer, Marx argued in *The Manifesto* that capitalism was fast becoming a world system (Marx, 1998). This meant that the pool of cheapened labour – the ‘reserve army’ (Marx, 1990: 792) on which it could draw for intensive manufacturing – became eventually a global one, including countries where the cost of labour as SNLT was at its very lowest. Importantly then as the example of Leicester shows this pool now includes racialized migrant workers in the global ‘North’ made vulnerable to extreme levels of exploitation by hostile racist border laws, regimes and spectacles – high profile raids by the police on workplaces and homes in search of ‘illegal’ immigrants.. In denying them both employment and citizenship rights such state ‘race craft’ encourages their mistreatment forcing them to work illegally for little or no pay in the worst conditions (Sullivan 2022). The contradiction between the dazzling light, magical images and excitement characterizing fashion’s global retail and consumptive space and the benighted side of its global production, intensifies because of the way clothing as commodities are produced for a profit in a competitive world market. At every step in its production, then, fashion exploits the labour of those involved in its complex and mostly opaque supply chain.

For Marx, separating workers from the means of production negatively affected and distorted our ‘species being’. This separation or ‘alienation’, as he called it (Marx, 2023), created a new and often damaging relationship with the world of things. This is what he called ‘commodity fetishism’ (Marx, 1990:163); a belief in the power of objects in themselves, sold to consumers as goods that can change their lives (see also chapter 6 on Benjamin for further

thoughts on the commodity of fashion). In this respect, fashion is exemplary once again. Behind all the hopes and dreams invested in fashion and all the symbolic meanings attached to it in film, marketing and celebrity images (Church-Gibson, 2012; Miller, 2011), lies a single unifying condition of possibility: labour, and what happens when control of it is ‘alienated’ or ‘estranged’ separated from and lost to us (Marx, 2023). In *Capital Volume One* Marx writes that ‘the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities’ (Marx, 1990: 165). In essence, he argues, this is an immense collection of labour, a series of largely hidden interrelated cooperative creative acts or ‘doings’. It is, he continues, ‘nothing but the definite social relation between people themselves assuming for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things’ (Marx, 1990: 165). This argument – the core of Marx’s theory of ‘commodity fetishism’ – captures the gap between fashion’s appearance as a visual feast, from catwalk to high street, and its essence or origins in, and continued existence through, productive labour. This separation of production from consumption, and producers from the means of production, created capitalism. Capitalism is then a system based on producing commodities for sale at a profit on the market, exchanging ‘labour power’ for cash wages, and that money in turn for commodities. It thus subsumes the social labour that goes into making fashion, while hiding its wider social and ecological costs to both people and planet. Moreover, for Marx, who above all argued that our creative ‘species being’ meant we could change ourselves by changing the world, ‘commodity fetishism’ threatens our sense of our wider power to make and remake history.

When the Italian political economist Ferdinando Galiani argued that ‘value is a relation between persons’, Marx added that it is ‘a relation concealed beneath a material shell’ (Marx, 1990: 167). Though mostly hidden from us by the fetishistic effects of branding, markets, distance and routine, occasionally the shell of the fashion commodity cracks.

On 24 April 2013 the Rana Plaza garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh, collapsed. It made clothes for Primark and other fashion chains. Over 1100 workers died and thousands more were injured as the world caught a glimpse of the global CMT army, the 40 million subcontracted workers who produce fast fashion (Siegle, 2013). Fundamentally, then, it is the combination of class exploitation and inter-firm competition within capitalism that accounts for the persistence of sweated labour in fashion manufacture, in both Marx’s day and our own. A century earlier, Bessie Gabrilowich’s escape from the Triangle Shirtwaist factory inferno in New York in 1911 involved her ‘groping her way through the smoke to the street below’. Many of her co-workers ‘leapt from windows on the upper stories’. In half an hour 147 were

dead (Anon, 2000). One hundred and one years later on 24 November 2012, Shati Akter Shuchona was amongst 1000 garment workers in the Tazreen Fashions factory near Dhaka, stitching orders for Walmart and C&A. When it suddenly caught fire she was forced to jump from a fourth floor window fleeing a blaze which engulfed a building with no fire certificate. 112 of her colleagues died (Ethirajan, 2013).

Returning to the Covid 19 Pandemic and taking on board elements of feminist critiques of Marx's work as too exclusively focused on the wage-labour relationship, Alessandra Mezzadri (2017) argues that her concept of 'sweat shop regimes' deepens our understanding of their persistence. For Mezzadri the issue is not only one of wage labour exploitation as outlined above, but of the wider extraction of value through the gendered and patriarchal dynamics of 'social reproduction' (Vogel 1983). Thus it is the unrecognised or informal 'domestic' labour of women and children in the patriarchal family, which underwrites the whole sweated system as a 'regime' reproducing the garment making workforce at minimal cost.

As the case of the 'Leicester Dark factories' reveals fashion production still takes place in the shadow of empire and slavery within 'the specter of racial capitalism' (Sullivan 2022, Bhattacharya 2018 and Robinson ([1983] 2020). Reflecting the intersection of class exploitation with race and gender oppressions, labour 'exchanged' so far beneath its core value as 'socially necessary labour time', evidences a racialized regime of 'super-exploitation' as Smith (2018) and Suwandi (2019) argue. By underpinning the subordinate position of global majority garment workers in both the Global North and South as a 'reserve army of labour' such racialized super-exploitation blurs the lines of that geo-political division.

Conclusion: Marx Fashioning the Future

65 years old at the time of his death in 1883, Marx was laid to rest in Highgate Cemetery in London, his chosen place of political exile since 1849. Though his funeral went unreported in the British press, few would dispute the extent of his influence on twentieth century history and the world we now live in. Marx's work has inspired workers struggles and insurrections, such as that of the Bolshevik party in Russia which in 1917 lead the world's first successful workers' revolution, ending both the barbarous tyranny of the Tsars and the pointless butchery of the First World War. Sadly, his work has also been used to justify tyranny and oppression in Stalinist Soviet Union and in Mao's Republic of China. However, several decades after the revolutions that spread across Eastern Europe and Russia exposed 'actually existing socialism' as a 'state capitalist' sham (Callinicos, 1991), Marx's ideas are today again

finding an audience.

Re-emerging as a key resource for those who seek answers and alternatives to the rapidly deepening ‘polycrisis’ (Tooze 2021) which defines our age, Marx’s work locates global class inequality, rapacious economic exploitation and the biological and environmental catastrophe as having a common source in capitalism. (Callinicos 2023) His work inspires economists who want to understand the causes of the financial crash of 2008 and the global economic slump that followed it, as well as activists in the global ‘Occupy’ movement and the revolutionaries of ‘the Arab Spring’. As a profoundly ecological thinker, Marx argued that democratic social control of our labour as our ‘species being’ held the key not just to our emancipation from class society, but also to maintaining what he called our ‘metabolism’ with nature and to achieving a truly sustainable future (1990: 283). Revisiting Marx’s work is relevant for the human species, because we are a species whose wonderful capacity to design and create beauty beyond necessity can be glimpsed in the best of fashion. Such a theoretical investment is surely timely and necessary for fashion scholars, because fashion is ‘the child of capitalism’. Rethinking fashion through Marx can only deepen our critical understanding of it.

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