**The Looks of Austerity: Fashions for Hard Times**

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**Biography**

David Gilbert is Professor of Urban and Historical Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London, and has written about the relationships between fashion and cities. His wider work is focused on modern histories of London, and he is an academic advisor to the Museum of London. He was one of the organizers of the conference *The Look of Austerity* at the Museum in 2015.

**Abstract**

The hemline index, still often referenced by fashion journalists and bloggers, supposedly identifies a relationship between fashion style and economic indicators. The index makes little sense, but its enduring popularity indicates a broader notion that that fashion does respond to economic circumstances. This article examines the difficult relationship between economics and fashion theory. It highlights the poverty of conceptions of fashion in different forms of economic thinking, including micro-economic modeling and a range of macro-economic and critical perspectives, but also examines the hostility to economic approaches in much fashion theory. Drawing upon historical work on austerity fashion in the 1940s, it argues that the relationship between fashion and economics is best addressed not through abstract models or grand-theory, but by careful contextual examination of the complexities of particular times and geographical contexts. The final section of the paper indicates some key directions for thinking about the relationship between fashion and austerity, and explores the potential of Raymond Williams’ notion of “structure of feeling” in connecting the materiality of fashionable clothing with the materialism of economic change.

KEYWORDS: Austerity, fashion cycles, economic cycles, hemline index, structure of feeling.

**Introduction: hemlines and hard times.**

In 1926, the economist George Taylor devised what is perhaps the most simple and seductive of all fashion theories, the Hemline Index. Taylor would almost certainly rather be remembered for something else; his early work helped establish the academic discipline of Industrial Relations in the USA, and he played a key role in labor relations in the post-war period. (*New York Times* 1972, 68) Nonetheless, Taylor is fated to be remembered for linking the length of women’s skirts to economic cycles.

Beyond the most general of correlations between some fashion styles and a broad periodization of twentieth-century economic trends, there is not much substance to the Hemline Index, except a remarkably stubborn piece of urban mythology and good copy for journalists and bloggers. The few attempts to test it quantitatively have struggled with the evidence. In 1971, Mabry painstakingly measured skirt-length to body ratios in images in US *Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies’ Home Journal,* then correlated against the Dow Jones Index. More recently van Baardwijk and Franses (2010) looked for correlations between a 5-point index of skirt length (with a mini-skirt scored at 1, to a floor-length maxi-dress at 5) inback-editions of *L’Officiel,* and the National Bureau of Economic Research chronology of US recessions. After some heroic efforts in boiling–down data, both studies found some degree of correlation, though quite what the results say about the relationship between fashion and economy is open to question. The idea of a single, approved skirt-length for each season is hard to sustain even in the more focused, directive fashion system of the mid-twentieth century. In an era of fast fashion, social media, multiple fashion geographies, segmented trends and the decline of fashion authority (and even occasional examples of women in trousers), finding a single definitive hem-length to throw into a time-series is beset by what might politely be called statistical noise.[[1]](#endnote-1)

However, irrespective of vainglorious attempts to provide an econometric model of the public display of women’s legs, the Hemline Index has purchase on the wider imagination because, however simplistically, it highlights the sense that there *ought* to be some relationship between fashion and economic conditions. Beyond the index is a much more powerful and challenging set of questions about how fashion systems and particularly the content of fashion – its looks, meanings and use – respond to times of hardship and affluence. These questions are ones that are rarely looked at directly in fashion studies or economics. An exception is the long-running interest in the “austerity fashion” of the Second World War and its aftermath. This example of fashion in times of scarcity, and sometimes extreme circumstances, along with the associated mythology of the catharsis of the New Look, has set certain expectations for the relationship between austerity and fashion. Yet, as Owen Hatherley (2016) has recently argued in an examination of the nostalgia for the fashion styles and wider design iconography of “Austerity Britain” in a new age of austerity, in many ways the mid-century relationship between hard times and culture was *sui generis*. Hatherley’s polemic against “the way that austerity in 2015 dreams of austerity in 1945” highlights the profound differences between a neoliberal age of deep inherent insecurity and “a completely different and highly unlike era, to which it is linked solely through liberal use of the ‘A’ word”. (2016, 12)

This article is not an attempt to construct a more sophisticated Hemline Index; Hatherley’s comments indicate the dangers of reducing cultural forms or economic conditions to lines on a graph, or variables in a multiple-regression model. Fashion in 1947 was “highly unlike” that of 2017, just as there are the starkest differences between the “age of austerity”, and “austerity Mark Two”. Instead this article addresses more generally approaches to the relationship between distinctive fashions and economic cycles or crises. crises. The first two sections examine the uneasy relationship between fashion studies and economics. Economists tend to have particular readings of fashion; ironically work that explicitly identifies as an “economic theory of fashion” (usually associated with micro-economic modeling) tends to exclude the impact of major crises or macro-economic cycles. “Fashion theory” has been equivocal or even hostile to thinking about the influence of economic factors on fashion. This is contrast to detailed contextual historical studies of fashion – the argument here is that the approaches to the looks of the post-war period may have more to contribute to our understanding of the fashions of hard times, than any simple stylistic echoes of austerity fashion. The final section builds upon this argument, drawing from other contributions to this special edition of *Fashion Theory,* not to build a new statistical or causal model that connects stock-market prices, GDP figures or unemployment rates with particular looks or styles, but to suggest ways that we might understand the “looks of austerity.”

**Fashion and the dismal science.**

The history of modern fashion is clearly bound up with the history of capitalism, yet the analysis of fashion has an ambivalent place in economics. On the one hand, fashion provides “economic thought with a canonical example in theorizing about consumption and conformity.” (Hemphill and Suk 2009, 102) Economics 101 courses teach that tastes and fashions are determinants of demand, and that a shift in taste for a particular good or service will result in a shift in the demand curve. (Mankiw and Taylor 2011, 74) On the other hand, most economists have little to say about the content of fashion; as *The Economist* noted, they have “no special means of telling which styles of clothing are fashionable … if you doubt this, take a look at what the next economist you meet is wearing.” (1995, 116.)

In neoclassical microeconomics, the central concern has been to model the operation of fashion cycles, with fashions in clothing seen as just one particular example of wider patterns and regularities in consumption activity. Very different kinds of economic writing, particularly associated with Marxian and Frankfurt School critiques, have long treated fashion at heart as a form of conspiracy driven by the functional needs of capitalism for continuing growth in consumption. Gilles Lipovetsky in *The Empire of Fashion* argued that neither theories of “some optimal ‘hidden hand’” nor “alienation … offer an adequate model for fashion.” (1994, 11) Elizabeth Wilson makes a similar point in *Adorned in Dreams;* such approaches are not merely over-simplified or over-deterministic, but “they grant no role to contradiction, nor for that matter to pleasure.” (1985, 53) For both Lipovetsky and Wilson, such approaches fail, not just because they fail to grasp fundamental dimensions of fashion, but also because in their abstraction they become ahistorical, and unable to contribute to understanding fashion’s response to changing conditions.

It is remarkable that the dead hand of some very old fashion theory holds up most contemporary microeconomic modeling of fashion systems. The ghosts of Veblen (1899) and Simmel (1904) and their ideas about conspicuous consumption, fashion cycles and emulation of elite fashions haunt such modeling. There is a line of work that attempts to translate what were sociological treatises (and certainly for Veblen as much satire as empirical analysis) into formal models. In essence these attempt to operationalize Simmel’s comments about the social dynamics of fashion: “Just as soon as the lower classes begin to copy their style, thereby crossing the line of demarcation the upper classes have drawn and destroying the uniformity of their coherence, the upper classes turn away from this style and adopt a new one, which in its turn differentiates them from the masses; and thus the game goes merrily on.” (1904, 135) From Harvey Leibenstein in the 1950s onwards, economists have tried to develop models of the “game going merrily on”, attempting to show how the decision-making of consumers, usually modelled either as snobs (consuming to be different) or bandwaggoners (consuming to fit in) lead to cyclical demand variations or fashion cycles. (See for example, Coehlo and McClure 1993, Corneo and Jeanne 1997, Di Giovinazzo and Naimzada 2015.)

If recognized in fashion studies at all, such work is criticized in a broader attack on the Veblen-Simmel focus on status competition and conspicuous consumption as primary motivations of fashion change. Such theories, at best partial analyses of the social dynamics of consumption even in the late nineteenth century, are woefully inadequate in thinking about the nature of fashion in times of bottom-up subcultural forms, age-segmentation, and massive transformations of social hierarchies. But such approaches also suffer from the limitations of neoclassical microeconomic modeling more generally. There may be great mathematical elegance in showing how a population divided into perfect snobs or conformists will over time lead to cyclical patterns of demand “going merrily on”, but this has very limited relevance to a world of rapidly changing social and cultural identities, and less than perfect knowledge. What such models also necessarily factor out are the effects of broader economic change on fashion consumption. It is relatively easy to use a limited number of variables to construct models with simple regular fashion cycles; it is much harder to combine this with an analysis that also factors in broader business cycles, the effects on consumption of hard times and affluence. It is harder still to model the economics of crisis or social breakdown, associated with war or its aftermath, but fashion behaviour in the ruins and rubble has often been both at its most intensely pecuniary, when every penny, cent, pfennig or groszy mattered, and most obviously bound up with status, distinction and emulation. (Guenther 2017, Zaborowska 2017)

Such ahistoricism is perhaps expected in the “theories of fashion” of neoclassical microeconomics, but there is also an unwillingness to think too closely about fashion’s relationships with longer-term shifts in prosperity in other economic approaches. To be sure, macroeconomic approaches to the garment industry conventionally treat fashionable clothing as an example of discretionary spending. During booms, consumers have more income, and buy more, or more expensive clothing; in recessions, discretionary spending is limited, and consumers will reduce consumption, or trade down to cheaper brands, while manufacturers and retailers reduce margins. There is also evidence that household spending shifts disproportionately from positional goods (i.e. those associated with the display of wealth and status, including fashion), towards more “essential” goods. (Kamakura and Du 2012).

However the contradictory, slippery nature of fashion goes beyond such basics of supply and demand, and fashion can have both pro-cyclical and counter-cyclical elements. While aggregate expenditure on clothing and particularly items that work as commodities for most consumers (such as men’s socks or underwear) may follow such patterns, many fashion items have a much more complex relationship with economic downturn. One common trope of the fashion press during straitened times urges the stylish that this is the time to “invest” in high quality “classic” pieces. In the 1930s some saw an opportunity to purchase luxury clothing that would have staying power, but also to buy social distinction for less because fewer others could afford such items. *Vogue* advised that 1932, “Depression or no Depression”, was “the most advantageous year for buying furs since the days of Christopher Columbus and the Indians”, and that “a mink coat priced at less than half it would have cost two years ago … is an actual investment. It will last for three or four years, perhaps longer.” (71) In the wake of the 2008 financial crash, a new inflection of this trope appeared in the figure of the “recessionista”.[[2]](#endnote-2) Again, the emphasis was on using an economic downturn to beat the system through “investment” purchasing of classics, and by the use of antique and high quality second-hand clothes. Above all, the recessionista claimed to substitute supposedly crude boom-time conspicuous consumption with a subtle and superior fashion intelligence that worked by combining carefully selected high-end clothes and accessories with discerning use of fast fashion.

The rise of fast fashion shows the difficulties of reducing fashion to patterns of aggregate demand. Its rise has spanned both the long economic boom of the 1990s and 2000s, and the period of recession and austerity after 2008. The success of the model has been interpreted rather differently in these contexts. In boom times the pattern of accelerated turnaround, short runs, and relatively cheap but strongly differentiated styles can be seen as a way of maximizing profits through speeding up product and style cycles. In booms, fast fashion can be seen as a way of taking a bigger share of increased disposable income by increasing the number of garments that consumers buy, crucially by giving access to a wider range of styles and developing expectations of wearing far more clothes. The global recession of 2008 and subsequent falls in disposable income in many economies might have been expected to slow this movement – indeed for some commentators, the great recession marked a moment when there could be a shift back towards slower fashions, towards clothes made to look after and to last, and a revaluation of clothes as things. (Schor 2013) Evidence from the post-crash period suggests a rather different story. The continuing success of major fast fashion companies after 2008 is in part about a common spatial response to economic downturn, the search for new markets, particularly after 2008 in China and SE Asia (Runfola and Guercini 2013). But fast fashion also proved relatively robust in markets where disposal incomes dropped markedly, like the UK and Spain, and it outperformed other sectors of the industry. Some of this was consumers trading down from more expensive fashions, but the performance of companies like Zara, H&M and New Look after the crisis, also indicated an intensification of fashion cycles. These patterns indicate a complex response to austerity that encompassed elements of price sensitivity, but also recessionista strategies, and even counter-cyclical binge or carnivalesque dressing-up.

If conventional micro- and macro-economics struggle with the relationships between fashion and economic cycles, more critical perspectives on capitalism have also had a tendency to push fashion to the margins. There is, of course, a long-running position that sees fashion as economically determined by the logic of capitalism. Elizabeth Wilson elegantly summarized this as a belief that “the function of fashion stemmed from capitalism’s need for perpetual expansion which encouraged consumption. At its crudest, this kind of explanation assumes that changes in fashion are foisted upon us, especially women, in a conspiracy to consume far more than we ‘need’ to.” (1985, 49).This view of fashion has had renewed force in recent political approaches informed by anti-globalization, radical environmental and feminist positions. From this standpoint, fashion is a systemic conspiracy that creates false desires, needs and aspirations (particularly for women), which exploits some of the worst treated workers in the world, and degrades local and global environments unsustainably. The response to such positions in fashion studies and more widely in consumption studies has been to emphasise the knowledgeability of consumers, and to argue that they are far more than mindless dupes with manufactured desires and needs. From the late 1980s onwards, studies of consumption turned towards ethnographic and cultural research that took the attitudes and desires of consumers seriously; in fashion studies this turn was expressed in work that placed issues of culture and identity at the centre of their concerns (see Mort 1996, Breward 1999, Crane 2000, Entwistle 2000, Breward and Evans 2005).

The danger was that this turn, in seeking to distance itself from crude economic determinism, reduced economics to mere context for social and cultural change. It was a danger that was recognized from the beginning by the champion of the new consumption studies, Daniel Miller, in his anti-Marxist polemic “Consumption as the vanguard of history.” While arguing that “*homo economicus”* was a powerful ideological tool far removed from the practices of consumption by “the flesh and blood consumer”, he also argued for the importance of “economic anthropology”, particularly for detailed research of specific consumer decision-making under conditions such as reductions in income, sustained unemployment or hyperinflation (1995a, 18, 1995b, 273-4).[[3]](#endnote-3) Miller’s call chimes with the best work in the history of fashion, where economic hardship or affluence are connected to cultural identity and consumption decisions through detailed case studies and examples. But the rejection of economic determinism also pushed to one-side approaches that addressed the broader interrelations of culture, identity and economic consumption, and particularly those attempting to theorise longer-term changes in consumption behaviour. Rejection of determinism easily slides into explicit or implicit positions that treat fashion, and particularly the forms and styles of fashion, as free-floating and detached from economic change.

There are perhaps lessons for thinking about economics and fashion that can be drawn from the debates over the nature of postmodernism and its relationship with “late capitalism” in the 1980s and 1990s. For some critics, the attempts of David Harvey (1989) and Fredric Jameson (1991) to theorise relationships between economy and culture were tainted by their Marxist ontology and commitment to the primacy of the economic. Yet, for Harvey in particular, the approach to such interconnection was through the ideas of the Regulationist School, notably the ideas of Michel Aglietta (particularly Aglietta 1979). In thinking about the relationships between various cultural forms and the developing flexible forms of capitalism, Harvey drew upon and developed an approach that was far from simplistically deterministic. This work had a number of features relevant to thinking about fashion and economics. It introduced a strong sense of the periodization of capitalist organization through the notion of regimes of accumulation. Rather than regarding cultural forms as a passive response to changes in production, this notion included a strong sense of the significance of consumption in distinctive capitalist formations. While the terminology used (“Fordism”, “Post-Fordism”) retained obvious connotations of the primacy of the labour-process and production, as Mavroudeas (2012, 117) has suggested, one of the strengths of the Regulation Approach was the way that “types of linkage between production and consumption” were used as central criteria “for the construction of its principal concepts and the concomitant periodization of capitalism.” What this work also indicated was the importance of setting consumption and cultural forms within a periodization of relatively long-term sustained phases (“regimes of accumulation”) and shorter periods of crisis, transformation and regime shift. Such an approach moves from seeing some times of crisis and austerity simply as periods of restricted income and consumer demand, to thinking about such times as transformative times in the intersections of cultural forms and production systems.

Harvey’s analysis of *The Condition of Postmodernity* used this framework specifically to address changes in in architecture, art and film in the 1970s and 1980s. He explored their relationship with the crisis of global capitalism in the early 1970s and the subsequent development of what the Regulationists described as post-Fordist capitalism, characterized by a shift from mass production and mass consumption, towards flexible specialization and much more differentiated, niche consumption. Indeed in later work developing the idea of post-Fordism, there was a shift towards a much greater emphasis on demand-side economics, and even for the primacy of the sphere of consumption (See Lipietz 1987). What such approaches did was to argue for the intensified significance of rapid fashion cycles, of novelty, innovation and niche products, of the consumption of goods with significant and sometimes complex symbolic content, and of social differentiation through consumption. What was striking was that such analyses rarely, if ever, paid attention to fashion in the narrower sense of clothing design and the garment industry. This might be because of a pervasive “masculinism” in such perspectives; as well as its totalizing “meta-theory” that was challenged by contemporary feminists (in Doreen Massey’s memorable phrase as “flexible sexism”), this approach didn’t hide its excitement about big architecture, cars and science fiction (Massey 1991; Deutsche 1991). But the absence of fashion may also say something about the distinctiveness of its economic history and organization, and the complexity of the relationships between design forms and wider economic regimes. As Nancy Green has commented, fashion systems had developed “flexible specialisation” long “before the term was coined” (1997, 4).

**“Fashion-ology” and the micro-histories of fashion austerity.**

Economic cycles, economic crises and a wider sense of the significance of periods of austerity and affluence are rarely given direct consideration in work that might be characterised as fashion theory. To be sure, economics often gets mentioned in positioning statements that emphasize the need cross-disciplinary approaches in approaching the complex and diffuse nature of fashion: “a rich and multi-disciplinary subject, and a point at which history, economics, anthropology, sociology and psychology could be said to meet” (Tickner 1977, 56.) There is a significant division between work focused on what might be described following Barthes as the “fashion system”, and the more specific study of the organization of the garment industry. In study of the latter issues of economic structure, and to a more limited extent the impact of economic fluctuations on that structure, are central subjects of analysis. Yet such analyses of supply chains, vertical integration etc. generally have little to say about the content of fashion – its looks, the creativity involved in its design, and the experience and meaning of wearing it.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Yuniya Kawamura’s rather inelegant neologism “fashion-ology” can be co-opted to stand for the other side of this division. Kawamura herself makes a strong contrast between clothing and fashion: “clothing is material production while fashion is symbolic production. Clothing is tangible while fashion is intangible. Clothing is a necessity while fashion is an excess. Clothing has a utility function while fashion has a status function.” (2004, 1) While Kawamura’s contrast ignores an important powerful strand of thinking that emphasises fashion’s materiality and the significance of its embodied, haptic and pleasurable sensual dimensions (Entwistle 2000), her broader characterisation of fashion-ology draws out key characteristics of fashion theory in the early twenty-first century, particularly as taught in academic fashion courses. Fashion-ology (either in Kawamura’s specific 2005 discussion of the term, or in this wider sense of a broad approach to fashion thinking) is not a tight coherent form of analysis, a single meta-theory of fashion, but instead often emphasises its complexity and slipperiness. Nonetheless fashion-ology tends to have a distinctive shape in its concerns and influences; this broad pattern is shared in other work providing a route into fashion theory (see Craik 2009, Barnard 2014, Rocamora and Smelik 2015) For Jennifer Craik, a turn towards interdisciplinary approaches to fashion from the 1990s onwards was prompted and shaped by the rise of deconstruction as way of understanding “how cultural practices develop, circulate and are maintained.”(2009, 115) At its core fashion-ology draws upon a particular kind of critical social science perspective, with a central conception of fashion as a symbolic and communicative exercise of power.

Such a focus does not, of course, preclude thinking about the relationships between fashion and economic factors. The relationship between symbolic capital and financial wealth is a core issue for recent fashion theory, and discussion of Veblen and Simmel’s “economic” approaches to fashion’s role in the power relationships of status and class has often been a starting point in working towards more complex understandings of processes and influence (particularly in thinking about how street or subcultural forms complicate fashion cycle models.) However, although a generalisation, it is fair to suggest that fashion-ology has been less comfortable about interdisciplinary engagement with economics (in all its varieties) than with semiotics, cultural studies, critical sociology, aesthetic theory, gender studies or social psychology. The threat of economic determinism has always been in the background; whether as an explicit challenge to older Marxian forms of analysis (with fashion a superficial reflection of fundamental economic forces) or a more general concern about reductionism – that the pleasures, aesthetics and sensualities of fashionable dress might be lost. At the risk of a milder form of economic determinism, it also may not be a co-incidence that the rise of the fashion-ology formation corresponded with the longest sustained period of economic expansion since the industrial revolution. Fashion-ology encompasses both celebration of the “fashion impulse” and critiques of excess; it is an interesting counterfactual to think about how fashion theory might have been different under different economic conditions.

Roland Barthes in *Systeme de la Mode* (1967), perhaps the urtext of fashion-ology, argues for the “diachrony” of fashion. The fashion system has regular change over time, but Barthes critically distinguishes this from history. For Barthes “history does not intervene in the fashion process, except to hasten certain changes in a slight way, in cases of major historical upheavals; in any case history does not produce forms, a state of Fashion can never be explained analytically …” (Barthes 1990, 295) Barthes’ commitment to the logics of semiotic difference leads him to suggest that fashion can “know only a very long history or no history … . Fashion remains outside history; it changes, but its changes are alternative, purely endogenous.” (296)

This view of fashion as rhythmic (Barthes suggests both rhythms in style over years or decades, and the “micro-diachrony” of seasonal variations), yet autonomous from external forces referenced existing scholarship that also emphasised the independence of fashion forms. Barthes drew directly on the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, particularly his identification of long-term cycles in core characteristics of women’s fashion in the West (such as skirt length and width, necklines and waist-position.) Kroeber’s position was more open to contextual influences than Barthes’ reading in *Systeme de la Mode* suggests; Kroeber identified systemic regularities, but suggested that that fashion change is neither the work of individual designers, nor an autonomous internalised logic, but can be subject to wider cultural factors, albeit on a very long-term basis. Kroeber’s work was also influential on Depression-era writers keen to counter the kinds of economic modelling of fashion style that found popular expression in Taylor’s hemline theory. In 1937, Agnes Brooks Young claimed that fashion has its own laws, and particularly its own long-term cycles, independent of external forces. Although not discussing Veblen and Simmel directly, Brooks regarded the aggregated consequences of differentiation and emulation as driving forces for fashion change. These processes produced 30 to 40 year cycles in fundamental forms (such as skirt shapes), finding longer-term order above the “numberless modifications” of detailing (1937, 4). Brooks Young’s concern was to emphasise the limits of the power of “a little set of fashion dictators in Paris” (1937, 21), yet made much broader claims about the autonomy of the fashion system.

More common than analytical attempts to show the autonomy of fashion, is work that loosely connects fashion to wider social and economic characteristics. In many general fashion histories, economic circumstances appear tangentially as thumbnail sketches of different periods. For some this is little more than the most general characterisation of periods or decades as austere or affluent – a common framework for writing about twenties’, thirties’, forties’, fifties’, sixties’ or seventies’ fashions has a simplified reading of economic circumstance as an influence on changes in style and mood (for a recent example, see Cole and Deihl 2015). James Laver’s fashion histories have often been regarded as archetypes of this approach. Michael Carter (2003) has argued, that while sometimes inchoate or even contradictory, Laver’s work did have a kind of fashion theory that encompassed wider cultural and economic factors. Laver appealed to the notion of the “Zeitgeist”, claiming that designers “are not their own masters” and “can only introduce an innovation if it happens to be in accordance with the spirit of the age”. (Laver 1933, 133) In appearances on radio and TV late in his career, Laver liked to be provocative in espousing a version of the hemline theory, “asserting the existence of outrageous correlations such as a link between the stock market index and the propensity of women to abandon corsets!” (Carter 2003, 130) Yet in his fashion writing, notably *Taste and Fashion (*1937) and *Style in Costume* (1949), Laver’s sense of the Zeitgeist was much more diffuse: a recognition of commonalities in design and style between fashion and other art and design forms, combined with loose, expressionistic characterisations of the culture of the period. As Carter notes, Laver drew back from giving more materialist explanations for change in the Zeitgeist.

What we see in this history of ideas about the nature of fashion is reluctance or even sometimes hostility to thinking about economic factors, assertions of the free-floating nature of the fashion system and fashion cycles, or perhaps (if Laver’s ideas are elevated – rather generously – to the status of fashion theory) weak generalisations about the mood of historical periods. Writing about fashion and its relationship with economic factors has been much more successful when the focus shifts from very general explanations or over-arching fashion theory, towards the complexities of particular times and geographical contexts. In work on fashion and austerity in the 1940s, discussions of long-term autonomous fashion cycles seem irrelevant, and calls upon the Zeitgeist facile, when addressing accounts of shortages, rationing, recycling, black market trading, and state interventions in design and consumption. In their discussions of post-war Germany and Poland in this edition, Irene Guenther and Agata Zborowska make specific and intricate connections between fashion design, forms, consumption and behaviour and on the other economic and political circumstance. It is striking that in both accounts that markets play a central role, both in the wider sense of the remaking of systems for the sale of fashionable clothing, but also in the very physical sense of market spaces and the clothes sold in them. In such work we see an approach that comes close to a historical version of Miller’s “economic anthropology”.

Perhaps it is in such detailed historical work and its contemporary equivalents that we are best able to give shape to fashion-ology, beyond broad claims about fashion’s “slipperiness” or interdisciplinarity. Fashion is best understood and explained not through abstract causal models or grand theory, but through the detailed examination of clothes, designs, events, actions and constraints. To write about actual clothes, designed, made, sold and worn in actual places and times not only brings fashion to life, but also allows us to think through the specific conjunctures of wider influences that make fashion happen; it allows issues of class, gender, sexuality but also of supply, demand, profit and loss to be written into the study of fashion in ways that allow us to understand their interactions. It is not a reference often cited in discussion of fashion, but J. W. N. Watkins’ classic 1952 essay on “ideal types and historical explanation” is instructive, particularly his distinction between “colligation”, “explanation in detail”, and “explanation in principle”. Colligation, the explanation of events tracing their relations to other events, usually in the form of narrative chains, is set at a polar opposite to explanation in principle, which involves treating events as instances of pure theoretically derived models governed by strong internal logical necessities (in very different way both neoclassical microeconomics and certain forms of Marxism work through explanation in principle.) Watkins’s third form of explanation, explanation in detail, works as an interaction between more general theory, and “the specific dispositions, beliefs and relationships of actual people.” (1952, 35) Philip Abrams (1982) took this form of analysis as being at the place where theory-informed history meets historical sociology, and as a route to avoiding both the aridity of sequences of events and the reductionism of grand theory. It is also in such conjunctures that we might make sense of a term such as “austerity fashion”, and to ways of discussing the relationships between fashion and economic conditions.

Two examples of such ways of working, taken from Britain in the post-war period, illustrate this way of approaching fashion. Writing in her London Couture column in *Draper’s Record* in 1948 (Feb 7th, 24), fashion journalist Jean Guest lamented the passing of the classic tailor-made suit. Guest criticized designers, particularly Digby Morton, for replacing traditional “London tailleur” with coat dresses and dressmaker suits, supposedly bowing to Parisian trends. Guest argued this was eroding London’s reputation for tailor-made outfits. Morton, one of the founders of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, replied the following week (Feb 14th, 55); while his response defended the new styles, he suggested that economic necessity had triggered the change. The fundamental factor was the cost of production at a time when labour and material costs were rising significantly. Morton argued that tailored articles “just don’t pay” particularly as a tailored women’s suit required two skilled workers, a “man tailor” and “skirt fitter” (woman) and their assistants. Subsequent letters from manufacturers backed this up.

There were wider shifts in the ecology and style of London fashions in the late 1940s that also reflected economic change, rationing and austerity policies. The Labour government’s industrial policies, combined with the lasting effects of bomb-damage in London, encouraged the development of mass production outside the capital, undercutting more specialist London manufacturers, who were also under threat from imports, particularly from the USA. London designers and manufacturers were also squeezed by a combination of government price-ceilings for clothing, high rates of purchase tax on non-Utility garments, particularly those made using silk, fur or leather, and rapidly rising raw material costs. By 1948, London’s specialist garment industry was at breaking point, as even clothes produced under the Utility regulations became increasingly unaffordable. The industry responded in several ways. The very top-end groups, such as those represented by IncSoc (couture) and the London Model House Group (ready-to-wear), lobbied for protectionism and an end to price-ceilings for elite design. More widespread, however, were changes in mid-market fashions that responded directly to economic circumstances. Manufacturers and their designers shifted towards cheaper and lower-taxed materials, with cotton and rayons replacing silk and fur, which in turn made it possible to use brighter colours and patterns. The range of designs was reduced, as manufacturers encouraged designers to create pieces that were variations on simple block patterns. There was a move to replace more costly features with simpler elements, reduce the number of pockets, or even to eliminate altogether some features, such as shoulder-pads, back seams and darts. The *Draper’s Record* (June 4th 1949, 23) reported that “because costings do not permit the extra yardage required by the ubiquitous loose folding panel, manufacturers get the same effect with a fold.”

**Approaching the Looks of Austerity**

Such micro-histories of austerity turn our thinking about the relationship between fashion and economics towards conjuncture and close contextualization. Such thinking also takes us away from attempts to provide a singular theorization of that relationship. There is not a sophisticated version of the Hemline Index waiting to be formulated. But they also demonstrate that economic circumstances matter not just for overall patterns of consumption, but also in the details of style and design; whatever it is that is the subject of fashion-ology, it is not autonomous and free-floating. In seeking the relationships between fashion and economics we need to set aside a quest for statistical correlations, quantitative models of fashion change or theories of the “in-the-last instance” determination of fashion forms by the fundamental imperatives of capitalism. Instead, drawing upon the work in this edition of *Fashion Theory,* it is possible to offer a set of rather more cautionary and tentative thoughts about how we might approach the “looks of austerity.”

The first of these focuses on the word “austerity” itself, and stresses the specificity of different periods of economic distress and hardship. Hatherley’s attack on the ways in which a selective retelling and reselling of Britain’s 1940s and 1950s history is used, has a wider message about the distinctivenesses of times of hardship. Fashion, with its almost constant reworking of past forms and references, may have at time seized upon the designs and iconography of the 1940s, precisely because of a supposed connection through word “austerity”. Yet even where 1940s elements are included in the fashions of another “age of austerity”, they work primarily in a nostalgic niche. As Hatherley suggests in discussing the consumption of other austerity products in Britain in the 2010s (including food and furniture, as well as fashion, and a plague of “Keep Calm and Carry On” posters, mugs and tea-towels), these work either through a hankering for some connection with the imagined certainties of parental or grandparental childhoods, or sometimes through “a haunting of the present by the unfulfilled promises of the past” – particular a lost England of post-war solidarity and collectivism (2016, 32; see Lynsky 2013) By contrast, Bethan Bide (2017) argues in this special edition that direct experience of clothes from the period, and critical use of family history has the potential to destablise and complicate established tropes about the post-war period.

More generally, comparisons between the 1940s and austerity today highlight dramatic differences in the contexts of design, purchase and consumption of fashion. Recent treatments of 1940s Britain, notably Geraldine Biddle-Perry’s recent *Dressing for Austerity* (2016), show the ways that fashion was bound up with political culture, notions of citizenship, and distributional policies. The 1945-51 Labour government significantly increased social spending alongside consumption restrictions, a very different form of austerity policy from that implemented in the UK and Eurozone in the 2010s. There were very different effects on the distribution of wealth and incomes. 1940s austerity in Britain was a key period in the “great compression”, an era of declining income disparities that continued until the 1970s. By contrast, the 2010s has seen an exacerbation of the longer-term widening of income disparities seen in most richer countries since the 1980s, with both austerity policies and banking bailouts driving inequality (see Nolan *et al.* 2014.) Just as we cannot read-off fashions from changes in aggregate economic performance or share price index, we cannot correlate styles with shifts in Gini coefficients. Nonetheless fashion culture works in contexts that are acutely sensitive to actual and perceived distributional forms; the micro-economic approaches to the “theory of fashion” discussed above are predicated on assumptions about populations with different income distributions. In the real world the relationship between elite, mass and niche consumption is shaped not just by the gross amounts of disposable income, but by how periods of austerity or affluence shift income disparities.

A second theme in thinking about austerity fashion points to the way that in hard times we can perhaps most clearly see the extra-economic dimensions of fashion. In this special edition, Rebecca Arnold (2017) points to wartime discussion of what British *Vogue* (January, 1940, 11)described as “not surface frivolity but a profound instinct”; while fashion’s course may have been altered by “wars, revolutions, social change, it has not been extinguished – nor will war do so now”. In extreme times fashion’s perceived ephemerality gave it its force. It is in extreme times that the strength of this “fashion instinct” is demonstrated, a form of performance and display that breaks with the more normal framework of discretionary spending. Ironically it is in the context of extreme economic circumstances that fashion’s intimate relationship to embodied identity – and hence its more-than-economic character – is to be found. The significance of small things, of a piece of reclaimed fabric, of improvised lipstick, or a recovered or stolen garment among the rubble of Berlin or Wrocław, points to the ways that hard times may allow fashion to escape the confines of commodity culture, and to take up different kinds of value and meaning. (See Guenther’s and Zborowska’s articles in this edition)

Such connections between austerity and the extra-economic expression of fashion may be expressed very differently in very different times. Zygmunt Bauman’s reading of the August 2011 riots in English cities has been controversial, yet it too points to connections between consumption and austerity that highlights behaviour outside of the realm of normal economic activity. For Bauman the riots were conditioned by a combination of austerity and inequality, “not a rebellion or uprising … but a mutiny of defective and disqualified consumers, people offended by the display of riches to which they had been denied access.” (2012, 11) Some involved in the riots spoke afterwards of reacting to “a society fuelled by greed”, but also of their hunger for the “right brand names” and the sense of exclusion when not able to have them. (*Guardian*/LSE 2011, 28; Garland 2014) These actions may seem very different from the stiff upper lipstick of wartime *Vogue’s* rallying call to patriotic fashion; the parallel with the looting described by Zborowska (2017) in post-war Poland is clearer, when practical needs overlapped with desire, anger and release all expressed through clothing. All these examples point to the more-than-economic significance of the “fashion instinct”, and that in hard times more usual and model-able relationships between income and discretionary spending may partially break down and take a range of forms, including making, mending, improvisation and recycling, as well as looting.

A third observation about the looks of austerity is that there is no simple or single look of austerity. The relationship between austerity and the austere is complicated, even if the temptation is towards looking for correlations. In 2008 in the throes of the financial crisis, British *Vogue* identified the “new austere” as the look of the times, while *Vogue Italia’s* special edition for that August was headlined “Austere Vision”, and focused on pared-down black and white suits and simple shift dresses. Writing about high-end fashion’s response to the great recession, fashion commentator Harriet Walker identified an end to “frills and froufrou”, and the emergence of a new minimalism of “sleek silhouettes, muted colours and austere androgyny”. (Walker 2011) Walker saw parallels with fashions in earlier recession at the end of the economic boom of the 1980s, when power-dressing was superceded by the deconstruction of Yamamoto and Kawakubo (Comme des Garçons): “drab, sombre and often deliberately distressed clothes to undercut the haute-bourgeois looks of the 1980s.” As the recession of the early 1990s in the USA shifted towards recovery and sustained economic growth, Constance White, fashion correspondent of the *New York Times,* charted a move in the collections away from “poverty de luxe” towards a “yearning for more adornment”, and what John Galliano described as “our own Belle Epoque.”[[5]](#endnote-5) For White, the early 1990s had been marked by “grunge, heroin chic, khaki casual, and minimalism” that “represented an unbroken chain of hardness, aggression and austerity – both real and pretend.” (White 1997, 24.)

Fashions for deliberately distressed styles are perhaps the most obvious, unsubtle responses to hard times. Writing in *The Face* in September 1982, in the context of severe government cuts and urban riots, Robert Elms famously identified a new “Hard Times” aesthetic in the clubs of London. He saw a “hardening of attitudes” in “ubiquitous Levis worn into holes, sweatshirts serving their purpose and losing their sleeves … trousers getting tighter, t-shirts ripped and torn” (1982, 15) Elms attempted to fit this (short-lived) move into an off-the-frayed-cuff fashion theory that could encompass fashion’s capriciousness, its referencing of tradition, and its responsiveness to economic and political circumstance:

“Imagine a spiral that begins with a birth out of affluence and post-war liberation and moves through time propelled by its own mythology and its own contrariness and is affected by technology and whimsy and economics. It is cyclical, but the circle is never completed because it is also evolutionary, therefore patterns repeat but they are never quite the same.” (Elms 1982, 15)

This was some conceptual burden to place on a few ripped jeans and a short-lived scene; Elms was documenting a particular reaction to the frippery of the New Romantic fashions of the opening years of decade. Yet it was an oversimplification to read those fashions as the replacement of a mentality of “Good Times” by one of “Money’s too tight to mention.” [[6]](#endnote-6) Fantasy, desire and escapism have also been common responses to austerity. As the micro-histories in the previous section show, as well as design simplification, a response to austerity and the opportunities of cheaper fabrics, was a move to brighter clothes. (The association of austerity Britain with a pallet of greys, browns and “greige” was not the whole story of the times, and its significance as a lasting trope of the times reflects in part the story of the later racialization of bright colours. See Nead 2017 in this edition) There are parallels in the recent success of short-run, cheaply-made, disposable fashions. In the UK, Primark’s remarkable growth has spanned both the boom years of the 2000s and the subsequent recession; the infamous stampede at the opening of its Oxford Street store in April 2007 predated the first British bank run for a century by just a few months. Primark prospered through the recession, not by simplifying its designs, but by becoming a kind of national dressing-up box.

Conversely the austere as a fashion aesthetic can also work as a marker of prosperity. The taste for minimalism in clothing, combined with a wider turn to the aesthetic of mid-twentieth century modernism in furniture, architecture and interior design, was a feature of the long-boom of the1990s and 2000s, acting as a marker of wealth and Bourdieuian “distinction”. Such complications in the relationship between style and economic conditions point again not to fashion’s free-floating nature, but to the need to understand specific contexts and conjunctures, and that there may be very different, sometimes concurrent, forms of fashion expression that relate to those conditions.

A final observation about the looks of austerity might suggest a careful broadening from focus on the details of particular times, places and conjunctures, to think about the relationships between economics and the periodization of fashion change. The challenge is to broaden out from ways that designers, manufacturers, consumers, journalists and others respond to specific circumstances to think about longer-term formulations of fashion systems, and their relationships with clothing as symbolic and material forms. The historical question that James Laver once asked, about the relationship between fashion style and the “mood” of a period, is significant if we take this to be more than just an exercise in sorting styles into the looks of particular decades. If Laver retreated into the identification of a quasi-mystical Zeitgeist, there is an opportunity to think more analytically about the longer-term inter-relationships of economic and fashion systems. In particular periods of austerity, particularly those associated with longer economic cycles rather than the immediate aftermath of war, have often marked not just downturns, but also turning-points in economic and cultural structures. To think of fashion’s periodization in this way, moves us towards thinking about long waves of capitalist development, regimes of accumulation, and other conceptualizations long-term economic change, including the Regulationist School, but also of Ernest Mandel (1980), and Giovanni Arrighi (2007, 2009). This involves thinking about fashion forms not in terms of arbitrary, decadal Zeitgeists, nor autonomous fashion or style cycles, but rather through their complex relationship with periods of long-term growth or recession, with effects of financial, fiscal and accumulation crises, with the effects of state and supra-national austerity policies, and particularly with changes to production and consumption regimes.

What this raises are issues that have long been central to critical theories of art and culture; fashion’s “slippery” character, both economic and also more-than-economic, positions it in precisely the kind of conceptual domain that was the central concern of the Frankfurt School and others who tried to grasp the “semi-autonomy” of cultural forms. The relationship of culture and forms of capitalism was also central to the work of Raymond Williams, and it may be productive to shift ideas about the periodization of fashion away from Laver’s Zeitgeists, the abstractions of ahistorical microeconomic modelling, or the quixotic search for laws of fashion, towards what Williams described as “structures of feeling.” Used throughout his work, Williams’ idea of the “structure of feeling” sought a kind of double-sidedness, its role to be “as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests” while operating “in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity.” (Williams 1961, 64; see Matthews 2001) It is an approach that is deliberately open, problematizing more straightforward notions of cultural hegemony, leaving space for agency, contingency and conjuncture, while recognising the power of economic structures and political formations. Recent returns to Williams’ ideas have taken the idea of “feeling” seriously, extending the original focus on written texts, towards a wider notion of the affective, haptic and sensory. (See Sharma and Tygstrup 2015) Such a reading seems particularly appropriate in understanding fashion as simultaneously commercial industry, creative form and personal experience.

Williams’ work also focused on change. He saw structures of feeling not just as dominant forms of cultural expression, but also as a way of understanding turning points and emergent changes, through new patterns of “impulses, restraints, tones.” (Williams 1979, 154) In their different ways and contexts, that is very much what the articles in this special edition on the looks of austerity are doing. Fashion in these readings is not just a “sign of the times”, a dependent variable read off from economic conditions and state policies, but also a mode through which futures were imagined, expressing not just hopes of easier times, but also emergent formations of class, gender and racial identities.

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1. Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan is reputed to have a different quirky clothing related economic indicator, the Men’s Underwear Index. While having superficial similarities to the Hemline Index, it is much easier to see the likely causal relationship – in hard times, new purchases are deferred, while an upturn in underwear purchasing may indicate an increase in discretionary expenditure marking economic recovery. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The recessionista made her first appearance in Mary Hall’s blog in 2008 (see <http://www.therecessionista.com/about-recessionista/>). The term (appropriately) had a period of fashionable use in 2008 and 2009, appearing in many fashion magazines, newspaper supplements and online.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Miller’s examples of excellence in economic anthropology focused the poor in the global south, but the claims for the approach can be extended to fashion consumption in economic downturns in other contexts. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. There are some notable exceptions: for example Simona Seigre Reinach’s work (2005) on the interconnections of design forms and production in Italy and southern China, and Sally Weller’s work (2007) that connects the development of global production networks with the changing geographies of fashion knowledge, design and institutions. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. White notes that the term “poverty de luxe” was first used by Paul Poiret to describe Chanel’s “Little Black Dress” of the 1920s. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Elms’ contrast of Chic’s “Good Times” with the Valentine Brothers’ “Money’s too tight to mention” in *The Face*  missed that Rogers and Edwards’s disco anthem was rather precisely about making good times out of hard times, and perhaps has become a more lasting symbol of popular culture’s response to the conditions of the period. (Of course, the political force of “Money’s too tight” also wasn’t helped by Simply Red’s 1985 cover version) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)