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# **What is 'Fashion' Really? The Promise of an Ecumenical Analytic for Fashion Studies and Beyond in a Globalized World**

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.68614>

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## **Abstract**

This chapter addresses the increasingly complex question of the nature of fashion in a globalized world. While it is strikingly obvious that fashion is a global and globalized phenomenon, its specific character, and indeed geographical locations and origins, remain contested. Drawing inspiration from the Greek historian Polybius, and his ideas of an ecumenical analytical approach, to studying world-wide phenomena we discuss the current state of fashion studies in what we consider an ecumenical moment, holding many opportunities for the field. In order to lay out the roots of current debates, on such matters we review the history of fashion studies from the mid-19th century through to today, drawing attention to both the ontological assumptions and the epistemological and methodological dilemmas that have shaped the field, and that in some ways continue to do so today. We finish with some suggestions as to what the future may hold for the field if the ecumenical promise of global fashion research is truly realized.

**Keywords:** fashion, fashion studies, globalization, global, epistemology, ontology, history

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## **1. Introduction: globalizing fashion and ecumenical promise**

This chapter is concerned with the ontology, epistemology and methodology of studies of sartorial fashion. The field of fashion studies has grown dramatically since it began to be institutionalized as a distinctive academic field from the 1980s onwards. Since the early 2000s,

'globalization' has been a topic of discussion within fashion studies, especially as concerns the emergence of new centers of fashion outside of the 'Western' cultural sphere (e.g. [1, 2]). Reflection upon 'non-Western' aspects of globalizing phenomena mirrors the concern with such matters in the contemporary social sciences and humanities more generally. But as the field has grown and come to encompass ever more diverse empirical contexts for consideration and analysis, the expansion of the field's remit has not gone together with a sufficient consideration of the epistemological challenges that are created by globalization and increasingly complex forms of transnational connectivity. In other words, the empirical purview of the field has grown ever larger in terms of geographical coverage and consideration of new territories and terrains of fashion across the world, but the philosophical ramifications and problems engendered by such a situation have not yet been adequately thematized or thought through. In this chapter we seek to make a contribution to that project, by reflecting upon how the field can be more thoroughly intellectually globalized and rendered more genuinely epistemologically ecumenical, so as to be able more effectively to deal with the globalization of real world fashion phenomena.

We lay out what we take to be the promise of an 'ecumenical analytic' for future fashion studies. This is an epistemological framework which sets out how fashion studies can and should operate in a highly globalized world condition. What has not been remarked upon enough is that as fashion and clothing become ever more globalized in multiple ways, it is no longer good enough simply to apply theories and concepts which originated in the 'West' to contexts deemed to be 'non-Western'. Mainstream understandings of what fashion is and how it works originated in the metropolises of the 'West' and the global North, so simply deploying them to understand fashion phenomena in other locations is radically insufficient. So too is the analogous problem of unreflectively defining fashion in Eurocentric ways, such that operating with a narrow definition of what fashion is means that phenomena in 'non-Western' locations that could be construed as to do with fashion on a broader and more ecumenical understanding of that word, end up sometimes being dismissed as having nothing to do with fashion at all. Clearly all sorts of challenges to do with avoiding Eurocentric neo-colonial assumptions arise when globalization enters the picture.

It is no longer sufficient today just to call for more analysis of fashion globalization without considering the methodological and epistemological precepts that are necessary for analyzing such phenomena. This involves more than just debating different meanings and theories of globalization and applying them to particular empirical cases. Instead, much deeper reflection is needed on how globalization processes change not just fashion phenomena in and across the world, but also the field of fashion studies itself. The varied dynamics and processes that can be labeled under the generic heading of 'globalization' impact upon scholarly fields as much as they do on the objects that those fields are set up to study. Globalization processes create new problems of comprehension for a scholarly field such as fashion studies, at the same time as making possible new potentials in the analytic reach of the field. In other words, globalization makes some things more difficult and other things more possible or achievable for the first time. What we mean by an 'ecumenical analytic' for fashion studies involves reflection upon precisely these matters. This entails more than simply advocating a

particular theory of globalization or adjudicating between different theories. It is instead a meta-level reflection on how globalization processes simultaneously render both epistemological problems that need to be overcome *and* possible solutions to such problems.

The notion of an ecumenical analytic reflection upon scholarly fields is inspired by an apparently unlikely but actually highly pertinent source, namely the writings of the ancient Greek historian Polybius [3–5]. Polybius lived in the early period of the rise of what would later come to be called the Roman Empire, and he observed the massive and rapid expansion of Roman power across the Mediterranean world and further afield. He felt that the increasing interconnection of almost all parts of the known world in his time necessitated a radical re-thinking of the precepts of history writing and of what we today would call social scientific and humanities scholarship. It was not enough to describe using old categories and concepts the development of a densely interconnected world condition, where actions of human beings in one part of the whole could have all sorts of ramifications for people in all other places. Instead this new situation characterized by complex global connectivity had to be thematized and represented using new epistemological categories and novel methodological protocols. In essence, as a new ontological object—a highly connected world condition—came into existence, this required the forging of new concepts and methodological orientations in order to describe it, and to collect data about it. Polybius's meta-level reflection on how a changing world was necessitating changes to the scholarly field of history-writing identified both the problems, and possible solutions to those problems, that were being produced by what we today would call 'globalization'. He regarded the densely interconnected world situation both as the object for analysis *and* as the necessary condition for allowing that object itself to be investigated. For Polybius, the ecumenical analytic reflection revealed that a new form of writing and researching contemporary history is not only a *response* to the globalizing world condition, but also is *pragmatically made possible* by it. The key problem in understanding a world made up of places that previously were relatively disconnected from each other but now are highly connected in increasingly complicated ways, is that there is simply much more to be studied, both in terms of the number of locations and of the relations between them. The analyst cannot just rely on book-based sources, but must collect adequate empirical data on an ever greater range of locales [4]. Polybius was profoundly aware of the fact that it is impossible for the analyst 'to have seen with his [sic] own eyes all the different places in the world and observed their peculiar features', a situation especially compounded by the expansion of the number of places now involved in the globalized world condition (in Ref. [5]). However, he also argued that while such developments made life more difficult for the analyst, they also made his or her work tasks pragmatically *possible* in the first place. Previous analysts had made errors because they had been unable to access reliable data on far-flung lands. This problem had, however, been potentially resolved because 'the special characteristic of the present age [is that] since every sea and every land can be visited' by the analyst, more accurate knowledge than was hitherto available could be achieved (in Ref. [5]). To put it simply, globalization processes create a world condition that is challenging to study, but also provide the researcher with certain ways of dealing with those challenges. The analyst must master and generate information about many more locations and processes than hitherto, but the globalized world condition also furnishes them with opportunities to achieve precisely that.

This sort of meta-level reflection upon the relations between ‘globalization’, and the scholarly fields which study it, can be applied to the field of fashion studies today. Fashion studies wants to study the globalization of fashion, but to do so effectively, it has to reflect more on both the challenges and potential solutions thrown up for it by globalization processes themselves. In the analysis that follows, we argue that this is a potentially ‘ecumenical moment’ for fashion studies, but one which is characterized by unevenness and the need to overcome some of the challenges generated by globalization. New empirical data is being created all the time about diverse locations of fashion across the planet, so we know more than ever about what is happening in different places and researchers have greater access than before to those places (albeit in very uneven ways, depending on who they are, as we will see below). But there has not yet been a sufficient utilization of those data for the purposes of fully reconsidering what fashion is, how it works, and how it may operate in ways different from the manners in which mainstream understandings of fashion think it does. The latter have inherited a series of assumptions from earlier authors who problematically generalized the experiences of the metropolitan ‘West’ and the global North to all parts of the world. In this ecumenical moment, there is great potential for rethinking fashion, but the potential is undermined if research on fashion simply continues to reproduce the assumptions of the past. An ecumenical analytic approach draws attention to how these problems are engendered by globalization processes, and yet may be overcome if researchers make use more of the opportunities afforded to them by those processes.

To pursue such a reflection upon the nature of the fashion studies field today, we lay out a history of the field, so as to see how it has developed over time, how it still has built into it certain problematic assumptions inherited from the past, and how it contains an ecumenical promise at the present time. First, we consider the pre-history of the field, which encompasses a period running from the mid-19th century until the 1970s. During that time, there was a shift from talking about fashion in relation to ‘civilization’ in general, to understanding it in a more narrow way as something peculiarly ‘Western’ and ‘modern’. This period was marked by various forms of Eurocentric and modern-centric bias and myopia. Second, we turn to examine how the field was institutionalized in the 1980s and 1990s, and how a newer focus on fashion as supposed product of ‘modernity’ was meant to solve the problem of connecting fashion to ‘civilization’, which by this time was regarded as an unacceptably imperialist term. Yet the Eurocentric biases of earlier analysis were retained unintentionally. Third, we trace the critiques made of the Eurocentrism of the field which began in the 1990s and were consolidated in the 2000s. While these critiques made various valuable interventions in the field, they did not manage to shape effectively the ontological question about what fashion essentially ‘is’, an issue which largely continued to be framed by assumptions inherited both from the pre-history and early history of the field. Essentially, the fashion studies field had started to be liberated from now untenable assumptions, but the full potential of that for rethinking stale and problematic definitions of ‘fashion’ had not yet been pursued. The chapter finishes by showing how that potential can now be more fully realized, and the epistemological groundings of the field recalibrated in a more productive direction that is more creatively attuned to the globalizing world conditions of today.



## 2. Before fashion studies: 'civilization' and 'modern' Europe

It is debatable when fashion studies can be said to have begun. According to some accounts, scholarly interest in fashion dates back to the time of the Renaissance [6]. But more generally, fashion studies as a field is often considered to have been established in the 1980s, with a number of landmark publications such as *Adorned in Dreams* and *The Empire of Fashion* [7, 8].<sup>1</sup> The new fashion studies of the time drew upon (and critiqued) a variety of previous research, among which some of the most important were classical sociological thinkers such as Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel [10, 11]. All the establishing works either explicitly or implicitly share some ideas. First, there is a recurring theme of 'civilization' or 'Western civilization', particularly in (cultural) historical approaches to fashion. Second, there is the idea of fashion's particular fit with 'modern society' or 'modernity'. And finally, there is an overwhelming consensus that fashion emerged exclusively in Europe. How did these ideas come to be so firmly established? To answer this, it is necessary to trace down these ideas further in the history of social sciences, for these are ideas deeply embedded in 'Western' understandings of history and the world.

The ideas of Simmel are well established within fashion studies [11], but he was not the first social theorist to write about fashion. Herbert Spencer touched upon the topic in his essay 'Manners and Fashion' already in the mid-19th century, and later discussed fashion in his famous *Principles of Sociology* [12, 13]. In the former, he links fashion with the individual person (as opposed to manners that connect an individual to others), and individual styles with democratic social order. Fashion for Spencer originates from the imitation of 'the great' or those in authority positions (he does not think authority automatically indicates greatness). This imitation has a dual motivation: the imitator seeks to express respect on the one hand, and to gain an equal footing on the other [13]. This, for Spencer, is not a 'modern' trait alone: 'Everywhere and always the tendency of the inferior to assert himself has been in antagonism with the restraints imposed on him: and a prevalent way of asserting himself has been to adopt costumes and appliances and customs like those of his superior' (in Ref. [14]). Yet in the earlier essay Spencer stresses that fashion is against political liberty as much as custom is, and that fashion is about stylistic monotony rather than freedom. Fashion is ambivalent in its promise of equality and its character of uniformity [12].

The theme of imitation, and the ambivalent and contradictory nature of fashion's motivations and expressions, recur in other classical sociological writings about fashion. Simmel considers fashion as an expression of both individuality and class belonging: it is about both imitation and differentiation [11]. For Gabriel Tarde, fashion is a particular form of imitation which is different from imitation achieved through tradition, and which emerges in historical eras when youth and urban centers set the tone of the times [15]. Ferdinand Tönnies considered the 'ever-new changes of dress and ornamentation' to be a consequence of 'the desire [for]

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<sup>1</sup>While this chapter is primarily concerned with how historical, Eurocentric accounts of fashion came to shape fashion studies, it must be acknowledged that cultural studies' importance for the development of fashion studies has also been significant (e.g. Ref. [9]).

distinction' among urban people, particularly those of high social standing [16]. The theme of urbanity is strongly communicated in many of these classical works, and is significant for later fashion studies too.

Thorstein Veblen, whose work has been of great importance for fashion studies over the years, makes a distinction between stability and change in dress: 'modern civilized apparel' contrasts with stable styles such as national folk costumes [10]. The terms 'civilization' or 'civilized' are used with apparent ease by these classical thinkers. For Simmel, fashion is part of the process by which 'civilized human kind has been laboring unceasingly to bring about [a break with the past]'. He considers 'civilized' people to be more open to change and 'foreignness', for '[t]he removal of insecurity with reference to all things new was accomplished by the progress of civilization' [11]. Not only is fashion's base motivation—the desire to differentiate—present in 'civilized' contexts, but for Simmel it is also the case that the removal of legal restrictions on how people may dress, characteristic of 'modern times', enhances and enables fashion processes. So the idea of 'modern' associated with fashion emerges by the end of 19th century and is often directly linked to 'civilization', like in the case of Tönnies: 'Trade and commerce, urban life, the growth of big cities, the power of money, capitalism, class differentiation, and the striving for middle-class status and education—all these are facets of the same development of civilization, which favors fashion and is injurious to custom' [16]. But differing opinions also occur in classical sociology. While Werner Sombart considered 'modern fashion' to be something that spreads rapidly 'across the entire modern civilized world', he also argues that not all fashion is linked to 'modern economic life' [17].

Social evolutionist ideas about civilization, which underlie many of these accounts, appear both more and less explicitly in many works about fashion. For Tarde, the chronological order in which 'semi-civilizations' turn into civilizations and mature civilizations is unavoidable, although it is not necessary for all civilizations to fully develop to maturity. Civilizations, for him, operate within their own limits through the means of habits and custom, but 'fashion' is what makes it possible for a particular civilization's principles to spread to other civilizations [15]. Tarde's ideas about fashion differ quite significantly from other definitions offered by other classical sociologists. One could say that for him fashion is visible in the macro-level processes through which 'Western' forms of, and trends in, sartorial fashion have spread to many other parts of the world, while most other scholars would consider the processes of sartorial change themselves as 'fashion'. Social evolutionist ideas derived from Spencer appear in later authors' writings, for example in Flügel's writings about clothing (although he also discusses evolution in clothing in more Darwinist terms too) [18, 19]. For him, fashion 'must be regarded as one of the most characteristic features of modern European civilization, since, in other civilizations, both of the past and of the present, fashion seems to have played a very much more modest rôle than with ourselves' [18]. It is worth stressing that by the time Flügel writes—the 1920s and 1930s—the terms 'modern', 'civilization', fashion and Europe had become firmly connected. This was not the case in earlier works such as Simmel's and Tarde's, whose discussion was more global, albeit shaped through readings of the anthropology of the time and, consequently, very Eurocentric in tenor. Later on, the broad, globally-informed visions of these thinkers came to be replaced by more localized and narrow approaches, often driven by disciplinary frames as these existed in particular national cultural and academic contexts.

A very early example of this within fashion studies is Alfred Kroeber's unique empirical approach to changes in fashion [20, 21]. While arguing that 'curves' of change can be detected in civilizations at different historical moments, he also sought to analyze 'measurable' changes in Western women's eveningwear. His methodological rationale is of some relevance to the discussion of the epistemological issues tackled in this chapter. He needed data that was accessible and covered long historical periods, and therefore he turned to French and North American fashion magazines of which his local library offered a reasonably comprehensive selection. In another early account, Quentin Bell, writing in the 1940s, drew heavily and explicitly upon Veblen's writings while paying attention to specific European fashion histories in his discussion of fashion. He concluded that 'Fashion as we know it in the West is not, and never was universal, it is a product of Europe and is of comparatively recent date' [22]. The capital F on 'Fashion' here is no mistake. For Bell, 'Fashion' and 'fashion' were two different matters: a distinction that survives in today's scholarship in the distinction between 'fashion system' and 'fashion' (where the former term usually refers to historically and geographically specific institutionalizations of the much broader phenomena of 'fashion', which the latter term refers to). He argues that seeking to find 'universal' reasons (as had allegedly been done by previous scholarship) for the emergence of 'fashion' ignores socio-economic, historically specific conditions that contributed to the birth of 'Fashion'. Here we witness again the shift from earlier, more general, more universal explanations, towards more localized accounts that were characteristic of trends in social scientific scholarship more broadly in the mid-20th century.

It is notable how already in these early studies, from the time before Spencer through to the period in which Bell was writing, the meaning and definition of 'fashion' is contested. According to Michael Carter, the meaning of the term before Spencer carried connotations to do with 'being in fashion', but with Spencer the concept came to be defined in more sociological terms, as a collective process governed by social laws [15]. Spencer's legacy in fashion studies is strong even when not directly referred to, or indeed when scholars are not aware of it. Similarly influential have been certain interpretations of Simmelian and Veblenian understandings of the 'civilized' and 'modern' characteristics of fashionable sartorial change, despite the ambiguity that is often evident in the original writings. The classical thinkers, despite their efforts to discuss fashion in universal terms, were faced with an important methodological issue. They were drawing upon anthropological studies of the time when seeking to understand dress and fashion phenomena outside of Europe [14]. But the usefulness of such anthropological research for understanding fashion can certainly be questioned. After all, these were studies often based on a relatively short time spent with a given community, and the studies were also typically filtered through certain pre-existing assumptions of socio-cultural stability [23, 24]. In European and North American contexts, with a plentiful supply of paintings, magazines and literary sources, it was probably easy to imagine that change only happened where it could be verified 'reliably' through such documents.

If in 1950s and 1960s interest in historical accounts of fashion was increasing [7, 25], the 1960s and 1970s saw a new wave of economic and sociological scholarly interest in the topic. In a 1963 special issue on fashion of the journal *Business History Review*, Fritz Redlich made a distinction between long-term and short-term change. Long-term change, which he calls 'Trach',



is different from short-term '*Mode*' or 'fashion' [26]. This is relevant when discussing global expressions of sartorial change, for distinctions can be made between 'fashionable' and 'fashionless' change. So, for example, 'Chinese men of today wear a fashionless *Trach* [instead of fashion]' [26]. Familiar themes—civilization, modern society, geographical location—appear throughout this special issue. According to Dwight Robinson, 'fashion is not only a product of modern society; modern society is in an important sense a product of fashion'. On this view, 'since other civilizations—the Oriental, for example—did not invent the steam engine, the spinning jenny, et al., they never achieved a sufficiently materialistic-oriented culture to make possible the extravagance of fashion behavior' [27]. This is of course a deeply Eurocentric understanding of technical capacities and inventions. Yet in the special issue there are more interesting points raised too which show that fashion exists in many different locations, including perhaps unlikely ones. Robinson acknowledges fashion in female Hindu dress, Keiichrō Nakagava and Henry Rosovsky discuss fashions in Japan, and Goldman argues that fashions have emerged in the Soviet Union [27–29].

The 1960s was in fact rather an active time for fashion studies. A doctoral dissertation on the sociology of fashion is written, an edited book on dress, adornment and social order appears, and the well-known empirical studies of Roland Barthes and Herbert Blumer are published [30–33]. But while there were attempts to understand changes in dress outside the 'West' [34], the overwhelming assumption of the time was that fashion was a 'Western' phenomenon. Similar trends continued in to the 1970s. Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of haute couture was focused on Paris, as were Barthes' analysis of semiotic fashion systems and Blumer's discussion of fashion dynamics [32, 33, 35]. Yet a voice doubtful of the assumed European roots of fashion also emerged at that time. According to René König, even 'primitive civilizations' had changes in fashion, and '[e]specially among the so-called half-civilized [sic] peoples of India, Southeast Asia, the Far East, Central and South America we find an unusually rapid change of the fashions'. While remaining within evolutionist ideas of development and civilizations, König nevertheless allows for fashion phenomena outside of European 'civilization' [24].

The discussion so far has sought to demonstrate how certain ideas associated with fashion had been established by the time when 'fashion studies' as a field can be considered to have emerged in the 1980s. The methodological point here is that all these scholars were operating with limited access to empirical sources. They were also largely operating within Eurocentric ideas of history and social development, which had taken shape particularly during the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century. This narrative essentially claims a smooth development of Europe from Ancient Greece to Rome, through Medieval Christian times to the Renaissance, and further onwards to the Enlightenment, industrialization and the rise of the so-called modern world (or 'modernity'). Not only does this narrative reflect upon other parts of the world as those which did not fully 'develop' in the ways Europe and North America had, but it also ignores the vast intellectual and material influence that other parts of the world have had on Europe throughout several millennia [36]. Yet it would be surprising indeed if fashion scholars had been outside this widespread frame of Eurocentric thinking. Indeed, fashion studies has always followed trends current in the social sciences more generally, as will be obvious in what follows.

### 3. Establishing fashion studies: 'modernity' and the capitalist 'West'

The first powerful critique of the idea of fashion's association with (Western) 'civilization' came from Elizabeth Wilson [7]. For her, this notion implies an elitist stance, embedded in colonialism, imperialism and racism. König, following the famous arguments of Norbert Elias, had argued that ceremonial fashion's development in European courts was deeply grounded in the civilizing processes that were operative in courts and urban environments where elites were located [24, 37]. Yet when used as a political and ideological weapon, such associations between 'fashion' and alleged level of 'civilization' can be dangerous. Just as clothing (as opposed to perceived 'nakedness') has been seen as a necessary sign of full humanity, fashion's association with 'civilization' has been used as an evaluative, rhetorical tool of oppression by Euro-American elites over 'indigenous' Others [38, 39]. Dismissing such 'civilizational' claims, Wilson was more concerned with the idea of 'modernity' in relation to fashion. 'Modernity' (instead of 'modern society', 'industrial society' or 'capitalist society') emerged as a central concept in social theory in the late 1970s. The debates surrounding the concept questioned the ontology of the object studied by social scientists, namely the type of society within which Euro-Americans were alleged to live [40]. Wilson was the first scholar of fashion to seriously engage with the concept of modernity,<sup>2</sup> and her account remains influential today. She considered the new economic order of mercantile capitalism and the growth of urbanization that emerged in late Medieval Europe, to have led to an emergence of fashionable dress that was 'qualitatively new and different' from previous forms of dress [7]. On the one hand, her account stresses the importance of the capitalist economic order for fashion, and on the other, she stresses the dynamism and unprecedented desire for change as being fashion's strikingly 'modern' characteristics. Fashion is also, she argues, about individuality and identity, which 'become' a special kind of problem in "modernity". Fashion speaks a [of] tension between the crowd and the individual' [7]. Wilson is particularly critical of Veblen's account of fashion, which she considers dismissive, and ignorant of the special aesthetic logic characteristic of fashion. For her, fashion is 'an aesthetic medium for the expression of ideas, desires and beliefs circulating in society', and therefore cannot be reduced to economic forces and social hierarchies as was allegedly done by some classical thinkers [7]. Fashion, according to Wilson, is expressive of modernity and created through it. Modern mass production allows fashion's democratization (while exploiting the workforce engaged in its making).

Capitalism and democracy are two major points in the narrative of 'modernity' that emerged in the 1980s. Gilles Lipovetsky deals with similar kinds of questions in his account of fashion. For him, fashion properly emerges in 'modern society':

*'Once we resituate fashion with the vast life span of societies ... it becomes an exceptional, highly problematic institution, a sociohistorical reality characteristic of the West and of modernity itself. From this standpoint, fashion is less a sign of class ambition than a way out of the world of tradition. ... the negation of the age-old power of the traditional past, the frenzied modern passion for novelty, the celebration of the social present' [8].*

<sup>2</sup>Blumer had used the term 'modernity' in his study of the Paris fashion world in the 1960s, but the meaning is not related to the later debates about the nature of modernity. For Blumer, modernity is associated with being modern, being timely, and being in fashion [33].

Lipovetsky argues that taking class distinction as a motivation of fashion, as was done by various classical thinkers, is mistaken, for it takes one function of fashion as its very basis. Instead, a historical analysis of fashion's emergence allows the socio-economic grounds for its emergence to be linked with processes of democratization and the development capitalism. As a sociologist, Lipovetsky reads these developments slightly differently from Wilson, a historian. An elementary part of modernizing a fashion system is its bureaucratization, which Lipovetsky argues to have happened with haute couture during the 19th century. Almost a decade later, Christopher Breward followed similar kinds of ideas, arguing that 'modernity' in fashion emerges in the 19th century, along with certain elements of modern capitalism, such as new kinds of advertising, new types of distribution systems, such as mail order, and increasingly powerful fashion magazines. Yet industrialization and technological development are equally crucial for new kinds of fashion at the time. Breward makes his points through the example of crinoline, which was made possible through a new, patented way of manipulating iron [25].

The critique of classical thinkers, especially as regards their focus on class-driven explanations for fashion, recurs throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Fred Davis agrees with this critique, and argues that instead of class, analytical focus should be on the multiple and ambivalent meanings embedded in fashion [41]. This does not mean ignoring elements of social stratification, but instead aims at analysis of different kinds of individual and group belongings, an approach characteristic of much scholarship of the time. While Davis connects fashion with modernity, his focus is on the social factors of 'modern society' rather than industrial, political or economic factors. For him, 'it is precisely the differentiated, socially stratified character of modern society that fuels the motor of fashion and serves as the backdrop against which its movements are enacted' [41]. Although less explicit about his focus on Europe as the locus of fashion, he nevertheless considers fashion as associated with 'Western civilization'. He also argues that the continuity of the fashion system in Europe is a sign of a certain level of cultural continuity, paradoxically expressed through processes of sartorial change.

As can be seen, a consensus about fashion's geographical and historical location was solidified during these decades. Typically this involved the ideas of fashion emerging around the mid-14th century, the significance of the emerging capitalist economic system for it, the influence of increasing democracy within European states, and finally the ground-breaking transformation brought along with the industrial revolution. Fashion is taken to be both expressive of modernity, and created through its fundamental institutions. A point that is worth making here is that while 'modernity' is discussed as deeply linked to fashion, it is at the same time acknowledged that fashion in Europe emerged well before 'full modernity'. The problem with this set of ideas is expressed by Carter like this: 'too sharp an identification of fashion with modernity can lead to serious problems. ... To simply equate "fashion" with modernity leaves us with no means of naming those regimes of vestimentary change that existed before the arrival of full modernity' [14]. A number of fashion history accounts argue that fashion is something geographically and historically extremely specific, while also taking the stance that numerous kinds of fashion systems have emerged throughout the centuries. Since no one would claim that 15th century court fashion and 1960s consumer fashion are the same thing, why this focus on 'modernity'? Even if it were to explain fashion in particular period(s) of

time, it would be lacking in its explanation of other eras. And even though 'modernity' can be described as a *zeitgeist* rather than as an historical era, as Wilson does in her later work, the term nevertheless usually refers to a historical period 'since the industrial and French revolutions' [42]. While 'modernity' offers some explanations of fashion phenomena when used carefully, it may also bring with it problems that are difficult to solve within its limited conceptual reach. The placing of the 'start' of fashion in the 14th century is also interesting here. This is the time when, according to some, 'European hegemony' over Asia and Africa starts to emerge [43]. Europe, previously peripheral in the existing world-system, starts to rise towards the core, dominant position that it then holds for several centuries. This rise is not peaceful, and large parts of it are based on ruthless military power, in a form sometimes called 'war capitalism' [44]. It would be possible to tell the story of European fashion in a very different light, acknowledging how its hegemonic position in the new world system is in many ways an illusion and ignores the significance of other parts of the world [36], of how this world order is laboriously created through forms of discourse and knowledge-making [45], and of how Europe's wealth, ultimately enabling the development of fashion, is largely based on exploitation of other parts of the world [44].

By the late 1990s, fashion studies had truly emerged as a field in its own right. Fashion had become an acceptable topic of academic enquiry, instead of a notorious 'f-word' [46]. This new field had also inherited certain assumptions and ideas, expressive of the social sciences of the time more generally. But, as we shall see below, a critique of precisely these assumptions had already also emerged. As the field became increasingly institutionalized, the number and variety of voices within it also grew. Crucial for the emergence of alternative voices was the establishment of platforms of knowledge production. While a number of clothing and fashion journals had emerged during the 1980s and 1990s—*Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* (1982), *The International Journal of Clothing Science and Technology* (1989), and *The Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* (1996)—it was the launch of *Fashion Theory* in 1997 that proved that fashion studies had truly arrived on the academic scene in a consolidated form. This journal came to be the leader of the field, and indeed provided an opportunity for a more global form of scholarship to emerge. One of the reasons it was suitable for covering a wide range of sartorial matters is that it took a very loose definition of fashion as its guiding principle. Fashion was defined 'as the cultural construction of the embodied identity', a definition which allowed for a cover age of topics ranging 'from footbinding to fashion photography' [47]. This meant that it significantly widened the range of possible topics and locations to be included in the debates in the field.

#### 4. Globalizing fashion studies: from lone voices to ecumenical opportunities

At the end of the 1980s, two foundational critiques of Euro centric ways of constructing the world were published in English: *Eurocentrism* by Samir Amin and *Before European Hegemony* by Janet Abu-Lughod [43, 48]. While these books have had practically no direct impact on fashion studies, the ideas expressed in them nevertheless found their way in subterranean ways



into 1990s debates about dress and fashion. Behind these debates lay a contradictory situation. On the one hand, the fields of 'fashion' and 'dress' research had come to be strictly separated in disciplinary terms, divided between cultural and fashion studies on the one hand, and anthropology and ethnography on the other. The major conceptual distinction between these areas was the presumed opposition of change in time versus variety in space. That is, fashion studies seemed to be concerned with rapid alterations in fashion trends, which quickly move across geographical areas, while anthropology seemed to be oriented towards more unchanging and geographically circumscribed and localised forms of clothing traditions. But at the same time, scholars were starting to question whether such binary conceptualizations were reasonable or indeed true. From the early 1990s onwards, there has been recurring critique of these divisions, of such binary ideas, and of Eurocentrism in fashion studies more generally. Moreover, the paradoxical result of the institutionalization of fashion studies in locations such as New York and London was that the channels created to communicate the field, most importantly the New York based *Fashion Theory* journal, actually enabled those voices that resisted the hegemony of Eurocentric fashion studies to be heard more frequently. In 2003, Buwar and Phatia edited a special issue for *Fashion Theory* on Orientalism and fashion, with a focus on African and Indian locations and colonial legacies. This was followed by special issues on Islamic fashion (2007), African (2009) and Australian (2009) fashions, black fashion (2010), peripheral European fashion cities (2011), Latin American fashion (2014) and Brazilian fashion (2016). The globality of fashion phenomena has been increasingly recognized in the 21st century in the pages of that journal.

The early critical voices of the Eurocentric hegemony in fashion studies emerged in 1993. Baizerman, Eicher and Cerny argued that many conceptually limiting problems in studies of dress were related to forms of elitism that assumed one-way influence in fashion: from elites to masses, and from 'the West' to elsewhere. In reality, they pointed out, these influences are always two-way processes [49]. They also pointed out that many ancient civilizations already showed signs of fashionable change in dress—a point much more elaborately and critically extended recently by Tortora [50]—and therefore the tendency to restrict fashion studies to certain historical periods and geographic locations has no sound basis in empirical reality. They also made a methodological point very relevant to the discussion here.

*'The result of trying to access worldwide data on dress is usually limited. Many articles and books on dress published in English are printed in limited quantities and distributed poorly. Primary and secondary sources in non-European languages, including Chinese, Arabic, and Hindi, are challenging to access: few American or European costume historians have learned these languages, and English translations of such texts are rare. Furthermore, political animosities have erected barriers to an easy exchange of information and have limited our study of dress in politically sensitive areas of the world' [49].*

Empirical problems were recognized by others too. Aubrey Cannon argued that historical proof of the presence of fashion in particular times and places is often difficult to gain, for '[archaeological] evidence of prehistory is a much better record of the outcomes of style change than of the processes by which it occurs' [23]. According to her, empirical realities are often also filtered through ideas to do with the presumed conservatism of local peoples, and change in dress particularly in anthropological accounts is typically attributed to external



forces or unconscious, random choices rather than independent fashion processes. Based on her empirical case study of the North American fur trade, she argued that '[a]lthough the processes of fashion comparison, emulation and differentiation are more noticeably apparent in the rapid changes that characterize systems of industrial production, the same processes are observable or at least inferable in most cultures'. Therefore, a new, more inclusive definition of fashion was needed, which did not come with 'the requirement that [fashion] be the continuous process evident in recent Western industrial societies' [23].

Jennifer Craik recognized similar problems in the field of fashion studies. Her account is interesting because it comes from the cultural studies angle, unlike the two anthropologically-oriented accounts mentioned above. She suggested that by focusing on everyday fashion phenomena, both Eurocentric and elitist biases could be significantly reduced. Her important point is that fashion systems should not be 'confined to a particular economic or cultural set of arrangements'. She also recognized that 'while' not all clothing is fashion, all clothing systems have at least a distant relationship with fashion systems and stylistic conventions' [51]. These kinds of attempts to extend the definition of fashion in order to increase the geographical reach of the field did not take root at the time in fashion studies. What did change, however—partly influenced by cultural studies more generally—was the increasing inclusion of streetwear, everyday fashion phenomena and forms of dress resistance into the scope of fashion studies. But, again, the geographical extension of the topic suffered from methodological problems, as pointed out by Antonia Finnane over a decade later: 'If [these scholars, like Craik] failed to substantiate their arguments fully, it was in no small part because they were writing before a substantial body of empirical research on clothing cultures in non-Western societies was available' [52].

In the early 2000s, voices critiquing the state of fashion studies emerged with new force, and this time what they were arguing was embedded in empirical research material. Charlotte Jirousek argued that a mass fashion system emerged in the Ottoman Empire particularly during the 19th century. While this system drew upon European sources, it emerged due to local socio-economic changes that had been happening since the 17th century onwards, involving embourgeoisification in cities, increasing disposable income among the new middle classes, and increasing industrial production of clothing. Her more general point is that the emergence of mass fashion does not need to be connected to any specific economic system, including modern capitalism [53]. Leslie Rabine, focusing on African fashions both in Africa and in diasporas, argued that these historically-situated and often trans-national systems in fact challenge the binary conceptualization of 'traditional' and 'modern'. Instead, within such systems a garment can operate and be understood as 'traditional', 'modern' or 'authentic', depending on its location and its wearer. She argues that '[t]he African fashion systems... challenge not only the tradition/modern dichotomy but also the opposition between Western fashion and other forms of dress' [1].

Finnane argues that between the 16th and 19th centuries in China, there is plenty of evidence of fast, fashionable change in urban dress, as well as consciousness of change, another factor held important by many fashion scholars to be part of the definition of fashion. She brings up a terminological problem forced upon scholars by some definitions of fashion: 'when fashion

is defined very narrowly on the basis of particular empirical detail about “a particular sort of society”, the possibility of any other clothing culture being described as “fashion” is by definition excluded... [T]his creates terminological problems in how to describe or analyze the phenomenon of short-term shifts in taste and consumption evident in non-Western urban societies that featured social mobility’ [52]. According to Penelope Francks, economic growth and industrialization in Japan since the 18th century served to create fashionable change in kimonos, eventually resulting in the emergence of mass-market kimonos [54]. Similarly, Carlo Belfanti argues that fashions have emerged in China, India and Japan alike, which differed from the continuous, established fashion system in place in Europe, yet still were forms of fashion [55]. While many of these scholars agree that the ontology of fashion has not been properly re-evaluated by the majority of scholars in the field, their voices are increasingly being heard and demanding a response.

No one can deny fashion’s globalized character today, but not everyone finds that this necessitates changes in definitions of fashion. Sandra Niessen points out that to recognize fashion’s globalization while still believing that fashion is ‘Western’ is contradictory, yet ‘alternative uses of the word “fashion” do not seem to have inspired a review of its accepted definition. New directions of theoretical inquiry that have been launched within the study of dress have not led to a critical retrospective of the field’ [2]. Such a persistent tendency that she criticizes can be seen, for example, in Malcolm Barnard’s approach to fashion a decade ago: he considers fashion a specific dress phenomenon ‘found in Western modernity’. At the same time, for him fashion’s emergence in society ‘is a good test of whether that society is modern, or western’ [56]. This argument has been accused of ‘circularity’ by Annelise Moors, who in her discussion of Islamic fashions is also critical of the exclusive location of fashion in ‘the West’ [57].

More recently, Joanne Entwistle has accused attempts to extend the reach of fashion studies as themselves guilty of Eurocentrism, claiming that ‘to argue that fashion can be found everywhere and at other historical moments is Eurocentric; it is a view that imposes particular Western characteristics onto non-Western places, flattening out regional variations and differences and alternative systems of dress production, distribution and consumption. As such, it appears to see fashion as a trans-historic and trans-cultural phenomenon’ [58]. It is indeed our contention here that fashion is trans-historic and transcultural, and *can* be found everywhere, but this does not mean that we argue it is actually found everywhere. What we argue for is an ecumenical and empirical approach that allows us to a) acknowledge fashion phenomena where they emerge, irrespective of our or anyone else’s presumptions, and b) to reflect what kinds of refinements and changes the discovery and recognition of such phenomena demand in our understandings of fashion. This is not, as Entwistle would have it, a ‘need to see fashion in all systems of dress’ [58]. This is, instead, the scholarly stance that we should take empirical material seriously and allow it to shape our ontological and theoretical assumptions and conventions. Nor is this an attempt simply to dismiss most fashion scholarship as Eurocentric, a temptation against which Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil warn. We agree with them when they say that the discussion should not be a shouting match where scholars exclaim “‘fashion was there too!—you are all wrong!’”. Nor should non-European fashion be considered ‘as a separate residual category’ [59]. We instead wish to see a truly global field of study that takes

all parts of the world equally seriously in its attempts at understanding fashion phenomena and fashion's ontological nature.

It seems clear from the wealth of material available for fashion scholars today that we indeed live in an ecumenical moment for the field. Yet some problems persist. In many contexts it is difficult to acquire historical material and therefore, for example, 'much of the ethnographic work on African dress, because it has tended to operate in a normative present, has not provided a sustained, historical challenge to [the] Eurocentric vision' [60]. A more hidden problem, yet one that many scholars are increasingly aware of, is that of geographical mobility as it is either allowed, enabled, denied, or enforced upon individuals. Just as Polybius was privileged over most others alive at the time in his freedom of movement in the early Roman Empire [61], some scholars today are significantly privileged over others in their passport power, visa access, institutional affiliation, access to books and journals, travel funding and research project funding. A further limiting factor is language. English has been so established as the lingua franca of fashion studies that lacking fluency in the language can seriously hinder the distribution of one's research findings. To tackle precisely this problem, *The International Journal of Fashion Studies* launched in 2014. Based in the very core of the global fashion world (the editors are affiliated with universities in Milan and London), it nevertheless seeks to tackle especially language-driven imbalances inherent in fashion studies, a problem particularly pressing in an increasingly globalized era such as ours [62].

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter has considered the ecumenical promise of and for fashion studies that exists at the present time. This promise is not just a possibility but a necessity if fashion studies is both to understand the densely interconnected world that it must comprehend, and to take effective advantage of the conditions furnished for scholars in the field by that world condition. Just as Polybius in the period of the early Roman Empire reflected upon the ontological, epistemological and methodological possibilities for scholarship in his age, so too must fashion scholars reflect upon such matters, both to solve the problems generated by globalization and to take advantage of the solutions that globalization processes also create. The inspiration afforded by a Polybian ecumenical reflection rests around the need today to think in a broader sense than is often currently the case in fashion studies, and to avoid the dangers of an unreflective acceptance of different kinds of narrowness, ranging from restricting the definition of 'fashion' purely to modern and 'Western' social conditions, and sequestering analysis of fashion in different parts of the world into the silos of specialist sub-fields. An ecumenical reflection like the one pursued here seeks to make visible how concepts emerge and are sustained in particular scholarly fields, and can get reproduced even through ostensible critiques of them.

So far, the critique of allegedly Eurocentric biases in fashion studies has been largely connected to empirical research outside Euro-America. This has often left the core of fashion studies untouched, as these fields have been labelled as 'African fashion', 'Asian fashion',

'Islamic fashion' and so on, reducing their apparent capacity to inform rethinking of what fashion 'is'. At its worst, such a scenario leads to the inability to see affinities and resemblances between different contexts of fashion. A properly ecumenical approach to objects of analysis called 'Islamic fashion', 'Chinese fashion', and so on, recognizes that a balancing act is necessary—that in the past fashion operated in such contexts in ways that are not entirely like the modern West and the contemporary globalized systems of fashion, but yet bear certain resemblances to the latter. An ecumenical approach allows for careful comparisons to be made between different fashion systems that have existed in different points across time and space—it does not deny the possibility of making such comparisons, as happens when 'fashion' is said to be wholly modern and Western. An ecumenical approach strongly resists seeing 'Islamic fashion', 'Chinese fashion', and so on as subfields which simply exist mostly in their own right. They should instead be seen as particular exercises in a much broader comparative framework, with studies from one particular area being used to inform understandings of all other areas. This is essentially the point of Max Weber's historical sociology, where different culture regions are studied precisely to throw light on each other, understanding their commonalities and differences simultaneously [63]. This was also the strategy of the recently-deceased historical anthropologist Jack Goody, whose Weber-inspired framework involved using massive amounts of data to compare and contrast the civilizational complexes of East Asia and Africa [64]. A similar orientation can be found in the work of the late S.N. Eisenstadt, another Weber-inspired scholar, who sought to compare and contrast phenomena in different civilizational entities over thousands of years [65].

All of these scholars arguably shared the Polybian imaginary of looking at phenomena in as ecumenical manner as possible, and they provide certain suggestive ways of making fashion studies more genuinely ecumenical. But where we can go beyond these scholars, again in the spirit of Polybius, is by going beyond merely comparing different fashion systems from across time and space, and showing how these systems may have impacted upon each other, with fashion phenomena moving across civilizational and cultural boundaries, both at particular points in the past and today. Fashion studies needs to bring to its analysis considerations of planetary connectivity that are obviously happening now and also happened, sometimes in less obvious ways, in the past [66]. Too few studies are informed by such an ecumenical orientation, and we suggest that fashion studies needs to be developed much further in this direction. Just as Polybius did, all case study material drawn from specific locations must be animated by and deployed for the purposes of a broader and genuinely ecumenical analytical framework. Too many otherwise excellent studies remain narrow in their focus, even when they deal with transnational connections which are involved in the creation and operation of fashion within the geographical and cultural areas they study. They lack broader narratives that consider three things—first, both the explicit and implicit aspects of border-crossing as regards the fashion phenomena under consideration; second, consideration of how fashion in that place compares with the workings of fashion at other times and places; third, and most profoundly, reflection upon how the empirical data, located within an ecumenical frame and narration, informs the ongoing questioning at the definitional level of what fashion 'is' and how it works. Every particular study should contribute to the ongoing reconstruction of the definition of fashion, so that better, more empirically and historically adequate definitions can constantly be created and then critiqued in the light of new studies that are constantly emerging. Ecumenically-driven fashion



studies requires particular kinds of scholars—those that know their 'own' specific area of investigation inside out, while being able to locate those much more broadly, in terms of comparisons and considerations of empirical modes of interconnectivity between different places and social groups. Such an approach requires scholars to familiarize themselves with a vast amount of literature and data from parts of the world they are not complete experts in, for the purposes of better situating their own studies and of rendering more effective their contributions to the grand questions about what fashion is and how it works. This is what the capacious thinkers of the 19th century were able to do, at least in part, reading ethnographic materials and seeking to synthesize their findings into broader comparative frameworks. Empirical studies today are incomparably better than the flawed ethnographies of the 19th century, not least because scholars are nowadays much less reliant on the biased accounts of others, and in an interconnected world may be able to travel to observe particular phenomena for themselves, the very potential for improving scholarship anticipated by Polybius two millennia ago. The promise of a genuinely ecumenical approach to fashion may still be beset by all sorts of challenges, but it is more within our collective grasp than ever before.

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