

Cloth, Community and Culture: Växbo Lin

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Exploring the example of the linen manufacturer Växbo Lin in Hälsingland, Sweden, this article begins building a framework for the discussion of that, contrary to the dominant fast fashion mass market sector, slower and more localized fashion textile production and use might be both a symbol of and agent for fostering a low-growth economic system, healthier environmental practices, and social vitality.

INTRODUCTION

Four decades ago the British economist E.F. Schumacher spoke about the need to restore small-scale localized alternative production and use systems as a means to counter the environmental and socio-cultural degradation caused by mass-market growth-oriented consumption society (Schumacher). As global environmental, economic, and social crises have come more apparent, pleas for humanity to create new systems that are not reliant on the hegemonic exploitation of natural and human capital have been made by a host of ideologists in many fields of thought and practice. As is well understood, the industrialization of society and unfettered capitalism have brought immense quantities of material wealth to regions of the world along with immeasurable global environmental and social damage. Two centuries ago, the textile sector, here referring mostly to forms of clothing, apparel and fashion, lead the way to automatized and industrialized mass-consumption. In recent decades, what sustainable fashion researcher Kate Fletcher calls “growth fashion” (2010), has become radically more internationalized and distributed in both production and consumption. In an oft-cited study, Pietra Rivoli takes her readers on a tour to the dozens of locations linked by modern transport and communication systems that are involved in the process of making a simple t-shirt. Like other production practices, the deleterious effects are beginning to be recognized and addressed. Yet, while a multitude of mitigating efforts are underway. Since Schumacher’s time, the majority of the clothing/fashion industry has moved to much larger scale and much more decentralized systems. The often environmentally violent and socially disgraceful results of this hyper-attenuated mode have been chronicled by many, most recently by Lucy Siegle in *To Die For: Is Fashion Wearing Out the World?* This is not to say that damages might not also occur in small scale systems, but considering that few small scale systems are in operation, the blame for the damages must fall in the current paradigm.

In *Small is Beautiful*, Schumacher, although writing two generations before today's vastly more *technopolized* (Postman) inter-connected, mass-producing, and mass-consuming world, expresses the urgent need for regionally oriented production and use systems reliant on technologies appropriate to specific places. Recognizing that because we treat the natural world as income rather than capital we are on a collision course, Schumacher states that

(W)e must thoroughly understand the problem and begin to see the possibility of evolving a new life-style, with new methods of production and new patterns of consumption: a life-style design for permanence (21).¹

In arguing for elevating human development over economic development, he calls for the creation of millions of rural and small town manufacturing sites (185) to re-awaken our appreciation of our profound dependence on nature and thereby avoid the destructive effects of mechanized and dispersed production and consumption patterns. Such community-scaled or local sites, instead of prioritizing the production of the largest quantity of goods by the fewest number of people as is usually the case with the high-tech internationally fashion sourcing model, would instead favor lower-tech, locally based systems and solutions that, appropriate to each location, value full employment of humans before full employment of machines. “It is more important that everybody should produce something than that a few people should each produce a great deal” (184).

Schumacher considered three categories of capital: “fossil fuels, the tolerance margins of nature, and the human substance” (21). Whether or not we are at peak oil production, whether

¹ Schumacher's prescient articulation is now widely accepted. Significantly it has been explicitly recognized by the 2011 publication of the first national assessment of the economic value of an ecosystem, the United Kingdom's National Ecosystem Assessment.

or not we can rely for many hundreds of years on new clean technologies for exploiting other fossil fuels such as coal or can shift to renewable sources of energy, it is clear that we have reached the tolerance margins of nature to support the aggregate global pressures of mankind. More recently, Hawken (*The Ecology of Commerce* 14) posits that it is too late for a sustainable economy, and that we must instead create a restorative economy that can potentially repair the damage from already having violated earth's limits:

The economics of restoration is the opposite of industrialization. Industrial economics separated production processes from the land, the land from the people, and ultimately, economic values from personal values. In an industrial extractive economy, businesses are created to make money. Their financing and ability to grow are determined by their capacity to produce more of it. In a restorative economy, viability is determined by the ability to replicate cyclical systems in its means of production and distribution. The restorative economy would invert many fundamentals of the present system...restoring the environment and making money would be the same process.

Many sense or have concluded that the human race has reached some sort of metaphysical or potentially transcendent moment. This shift may be as radical as other major previous historical changes of human history, such as the development of agriculture or the transition from feudal to industrial society. Renowned artist Michelangelo Pistoletto envisions a "third paradise", a new stage of human consciousness that will result in an elegant harmonization of the intelligence of nature and the intelligence of humanity (Pistoletto). In another vision, Jeremy Rifkin speaks of a new era of enlightenment resultant from the evolutionary need to overcome the contemporary calamitous environmental, social, and economic crises that we collectively face. Rifkin theorizes that the advent of instantaneous global communication could provide the means for a new era of humanistic empathy for human differences and communion with nature. Acknowledging Schumacher, Daly, Sen, Latouche, Bello, and other leading figures of the argument for steady-state economies, Peter Jackson has re-emphasized the folly of equating prosperity with growth. Nonetheless, and notwithstanding the increasing number of actions that are being taken to improve things, global material consumption and carbon dioxide emissions continue to increase (International Energy Agency).

One of the smaller-scale behavioral changes occurring in industrially developed parts of the world is the trend toward consuming locally produced food. Shopping at farmers markets², subscribing to community supported agriculture, and home gardening are ways that people are re-connecting with their sources of food. These actions are said to enhance a sense of community, mutual responsibility, and likely lead to better physical health than using large-scale industrial food systems (Pollan; Petrini; Schlosser). In the textile sector, there are very few models of production and use that are as local. The increase in the wearing of second-hand clothing and do-it-yourself fashion are sometimes cited as initial or symbolic indicators or steps toward living within healthier environmental parameters. Moreover, there are thousands of small-scale and bespoke producers around the world, and commerce is growing between craftworkers in developing countries and customers in wealthier countries that are in, in terms of production if not use, more localized than the norm. Whether or not such small producers fit into the rubric of *fashion* per se, they are certainly part of the varied, complex, and overlapping clothing sectors (industrial/artisanal; global/local; fashionable/antifashionable) that must be reconsidered if we are to understand how this vast matrix adds or subtracts to our lives.

² In the United States, the Department of Agriculture reports a 17 percent increase in the number of farmers markets between 2010 and 2011. <http://www.ams.usda.gov>

FASHION

Fashion is defined by almost all who study it to be based on material newness and constant physical change, but its symbolic and expressive value is what distinguishes it from the practical needs that are met with clothing. Welters, in summarizing the consensus, relays that costume historians generally believe that fashion, as it is more or less commonly understood today, began in Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century. At that time changes in dress style began to occur every few generations. If such a clear date cannot be fixed without question (there are many conceptions about what constitutes fashion and therefore when it began) the origin of continually changing fashion is undoubtedly linked with the transition from agrarian to industrial economies (Barnard). With the systemic changes caused by industrial and technological revolutions, the pace of fashion has increased rapidly. The frenzy of iterations is what “sustains” most of the global fashion industry today. Freeing fashion from its compulsion to “eat itself” (Fletcher in Chapman), in other words, decoupling fashion from constant change and mass-market race-to-the bottom hegemony, would appear to be key to solving environmental, social, and cultural damage that fashion is causing worldwide.

Expanding on what was said above, fashion is a primarily symbolic performance—representing oneself through what one wears, showing that one is both an individual and simultaneously part of a group. Authors describe both the unique aspects and commonalities that are represented by terms such as clothing, apparel, style, fashion, dress, and adornment. It is perhaps useful to note some of the less common terminology. Barnard introduces “anti-fashion”, a term representing symbolic clothing that rarely changes form, such as religious vestments or royal coronations. Kawamura speaks of “opponents of fashion” such as Mary Wollstonecraft who likened fashion to slavery (11). Vinken, in *Fashion Zeitgeist*, calls “postfashion” the dissolution of our borders that mark out stylistic regions (67). Non-fashion cultures might be thought of as those in which dress is indigenous, such as extremely isolated areas of the world, or as happened in China during the Cultural Revolution when trend and individual expression in clothing choices were extremely curtailed.

A half a century and a continent away from the Mao Suit, in the spring of 2011 an advertising campaign by a leading Nordic fast fashion retailer, Gina Tricot, had the tag line “New Fashion Everyday”. The irony of course is that much of Gina Tricot’s products, like so many other fashion retailers’ stock, is made in China. That fashion is intrinsically tied to growth-based capitalist (or at least post-feudal) economies, is no surprise to anyone living in a saturated market economy. In the words of Barnard “fashion follows, almost by definition from this kind of socio-economic organization” (18). In light of what is increasingly understood as a kind of epidemic consumption mania, and with the reminders from scholars that not all clothing is fashion, the question should be asked if what is often called mainstream fast fashion these days should even be described as fashion. In other words, is the stuff most of us are wearing really fashion? A self-evident majority of industrial fashion consumed seems neither to express individuality (how could it when garments are produced in the hundreds of thousand if not millions of identical units) nor membership in a group or class (since the vast bulk of what is consumed cannot be clearly associated for example, with a particular socio-economic group or ethnic identity). It could be argued that mainstream fashion is perhaps closer to pathological behavior than a means to self-expression or symbolic associations.

Reviewing the developing field of fashion studies, Kawamura in *Fashion-ology* notes that fashion “is not visual clothing but is the invisible elements included in clothing”. The mysterious space between the visible and the invisible is a powerful creative driver of fashion; yet class, status, quality, and regional differences that historically were easily apprehended have become much less “seeable” as homogenous fashion has become ubiquitous. Hybridizations and local adaptations are common to specific places (Maynard), but

particularly in the developed world, there is little apparent sartorial diversity. Aspects of a t-shirt wearing individual's invisible reality such as wealth, education, or “class” are fairly undetectable based on garment alone. A top-quality linen yarn might have sheen and a cool smooth hand, but it is imperceptible if it is therapeutic or toxic, hand-cultivated by monks or machine harvested. Fiber origin, the supply and production network, processes, and pricing are invisible to the consumers of nearly all forms of modern clothing. But these unseen realities, as well as visually apparent expressions, such as local interpretations, re-assignments of meaning, personalized alterations of finished goods, recycling of all sorts, are gaining importance in the creation of fashionable clothing. Though linguistically ironic, efforts at transparency via simple hang tags with producers' stories and complex corporate websites with emissions calculators are increasingly communicating invisibilities. It seems to this writer that the symbolic meanings that are conveyed by the invisibilities of fashion may soon conform more to standards of healthy production and use systems. In such a style system, what a garment is will be as important as what it looks like. Perhaps paradoxically this may allow the visible aspects of fashion to become again more diverse, more meaningful, and connected to what Carbonaro has referred to as a new “aesthetics of ethics”. These sorts of apparent and inapparent qualities of fashion are especially relevant today as branches of fashion show micro-signs of evolving from a sector nearly exclusively based on the growth-based global business model to models that are trying to align with the ideals of steady-state, multi-local (Manzini) economies. As will be explained further, the case of Våxbo Lin is a good place to consider what modes fashion might take in the sort of restorative economic models that are proposed for human survival. Before arriving at the discussion of Våxbo Lin, a brief overview of what constitutes fast fashion and a somewhat more in-depth description of slow fashion are given.

FAST FASHION

The United States is habitually shown as the evilest culprit of over-consumption because of its disproportionate use of the world's resources. Yet very high apparel consumption patterns occur throughout the (once upon a time) well-capitalized world. While in theoretical terms there is a significant difference between fashion and clothing, in import-export terms both are aggregated under the term apparel. The majority, in some cases almost the totality of what is worn in the “western” world is manufactured in the “east”. These items are however produced with globally sourced raw materials, and are often finished closer to the eventual market. Undergarments made of American grown cotton might be spun and knitted in Asia, cut and sewn in the Caribbean and then shipped still again to the US for printing, packaging, and eventual sale (Rivoli). In the US, close to 97 percent, and in the UK, close to 90 percent, of clothing is (re) imported in this way (American Apparel and Footwear; Defra). In weight, this accounts for, in the US almost 13 million tons (EPA), and in the UK nearly two million tons (Defra) of clothing per year, most of which eventually goes to landfills (Allwood).

Sweden, the country in which Våxbo Lin is situated, is popularly thought of at the vanguard of environmentalism (The Reputation Institute in The Local), yet in terms of per person use of industrially produced “fashion”, it is similarly profligate to the US and UK. In a recent background paper produced by MISTRA, the Swedish based Foundation for Environmental Research (Cato) the following statistics are given:

In 2008, about 66,000 tons of clothes were imported, equalling 7 kilos per person and representing an increase of 28% since 2002;

13 percent of “direct sale to consumers” in Sweden is clothes and shoes to compare with 35% for food. The total direct sale value was 546 billion SEK in 2007;

Every year, the average Swede discards 22 kilos of clothing and textiles while only 17.5%

goes to reuse or recycling. According to Myrorna [the Salvation Army in Sweden], it collects around one third of this, around 10,000 tonnes per year, mainly for reuse;

94% of women aged 16-24 purchased clothing at least once per month already in 2001.

The total consumption of clothes and shoes in Sweden has escalated during the last ten years.

Millions of individuals are employed, frequently at exploitive wages and in poor working conditions, worldwide in the production of fashion/apparel. Although some are hired to do handwork at points in production where machine use is problematic or impossible, the mainstream textile, clothing, and fashion sectors' modus operandi is to produce more material volume with less human input. This mass-market-production model of manufacturing is the paradigm against which emerging and as yet unknown alternative modes of production and use need to be imagined. Fast Fashion in the context of this paper describes not only business models and consumer behavior patterns that rely on just-in-time production, daily changes of retail stock and style, and high-volume very temporary use, but the matrix of operations and behaviors that could be said to be too fast, whatever its measured absolute speed, to be slow enough to harmonize with humanity's unquestionable place within Bello's "envelope of the environment". It is well-documented and increasingly known to producers and consumers that the dominant global fashion sector is radically unsustainable. Grievous problems include exploitive labor practices (see Ross; Shell; Hawken et al.); toxic production and use practices, (see Slater; Siegle; Defra); and the diversity-diminishing effects caused by monolithic mass-market hegemony (see Maynard; Barnard). This is not to say that the industry is not monetarily successful or that its output is not enthusiastically consumed, nor that the material comfort attained through employment and use of products that the sector provides is not of value. The salient point is that fast fashion practices such as the race to the bottom for cheap labor, the externalization of the cost of natural capital, and compulsive consumption, are without doubt a profoundly noxious set of problems. The apparel system, and therefore the fashion system, needs a deep and lasting re-invention.

SLOW FASHION

The term slow fashion is understood in many different ways but has been in use in the fashion sector since at least 2003 (Fletcher 2011). In *The Ecologist* in June 2007, Fletcher writes:

Slow fashion is about designing, producing, consuming and living better. Slow fashion is not time-based but quality-based (which has some time components). Slow is not the opposite of fast – there is no dualism – but a different approach in which designers, buyers, retailers and consumers are more aware of the impacts of products on workers, communities and ecosystems.

...In melding the ideas of the slow movement with the global clothing industry, we build a new vision for fashion in the era of sustainability: where pleasure and fashion is linked with awareness and responsibility (Fletcher 2007a).

While I find it problematic to reconcile that slow is not the opposite of fast, the essential message is the need for change. In pre-industrial times people were of course intimately connected with the manufacture and wearing of their clothing: All manufacturing could be said to have been slow. Yet just as industrial food production has caused people in highly

industrialized economies to loose basic knowledge of the journey food takes, it is equally if not more so the case that industrial fashion has caused people to be radically detached from all that occurs previous to clothing's appearance at a mall, high street outlet, or supermarket. In "Clothes That Connect", (2007b), Fletcher articulates ways in which individual actions, small-scale production systems, new forms of fashion ownership and use could do a systemically healthier job of fulfilling our practical and expressive needs. Heterogenic and unique styles, changed expectations (clothes that you would not want to launder, or that are pre-ordained to have multiple lives), and the deeper interactions that are encouraged by people connecting through small and knowable networks are among the many potential change agents that fit under the umbrella of slow fashion. In a similar vein, Manzini proposes a "scenario of a multi-local society". In such a society, local products for local markets are essential cultural building blocks. They embody holistic value created through internalizing environmental, socio-economic and political ramifications of their production and use. Products made within these so-called distributed economies are "linked to the place of origin and to the cultural and social values that characterize [or presumably might re-characterize or restore] their conception and production" (Manzini 84). Contemplating how such production and use might be manifest in the realm of fashion—plausibly the most far-flung industry of all—is fascinating.

Although fibers and fabric have been traded long distances and inter-culturally for millennia (silk garments from the east were known in Scandinavia since at least early medieval times), the normal situation in the hyper-commoditized societies of today is for individuals to be out of touch, literally and figuratively, with the complex myriad of resources, processes, and reverberations that come together to provide a sweater or a pair of pants. From the author's personal experience, it is possible to say that very few of the international group of young people who begin their study of fashion design and marketing at a well-known fashion college in New York arrive with enough knowledge of fabrics to confidently know that wool comes from sheep or that polyester is made with petroleum. This comment is not given to denigrate these students. Who among them has had an opportunity to harvest a plant or shear a sheep, run a spinning machine, or know what it is to dress a loom? Apparel production practices are extremely obscured. Such lack of knowledge is noted as a simple measurement of how industrial culture has cleaved the life experience of textile production from the life experience of textile use.

Despite a potential connotation, slow fashion does not aim for a wholesale return to the pre-industrial past. It does however often look backward to models of more locally integrated methods to pair with contemporary knowledge, in the hope for a fundamentally new (fashion) future. In this way, it has like many fashion movements before it, political aims. Slow fashion could certainly be understood as sustainable fashion but slow fashion is preferred here because it perhaps is more easily associated with the dream of a restorative economy. Perhaps the name restorative fashion will someday be employed. An example of pure slow fashion, if it existed, would test the status quo of high-speed constant change and growth in material throughput. Envisioning a new-fashion utopia philosophically connected to the 20th century arts and crafts movements, and correlating to many other contemporary design manifestos, a trio of master's students from the Blekinge Institute of Technology in Sweden aggregates in plain language many of the commonly espoused factors that form a concept for an alternative:

...seeing the big picture, slowing down consumption, allowing diversity, respecting people, acknowledging human needs, building relationships, valuing resourcefulness, maintaining quality and beauty, creating profitability, practicing consciousness (Slow Fashion: Tailoring).

In November 2008, fashion theorist Hazel Clark proposed that:

The slow approach presents the prospect of fashion minus many of the worst aspects of the current global system especially its extreme wastefulness, human exploitation and lack of concern for environmental issues. But the slow approach is more than a literal opposite to fast fashion. The term is used to identify sustainable fashion solutions based on the repositioning of strategies of design, production, consumption, use and reuse...The meaning of the term continues to be discussed by uncountable numbers of fashion followers, bloggers, critics, business people, producers, and wearers (Changing Fashion).

In contrast to calls requiring systemic changes, The New York Times' fashion fabulist Suzy Menkes, seems to miss the larger picture in at least one recent article when she calls Hermès' autumn/winter 2011 collection slow fashion because it embodied "a belief that fine clothes should be made with exquisite materials and are meant to be embraced and long-loved..." Not only fine clothes and exquisite materials are part of slow or sustainable fashion. Though luxury high priced fashion of lasting quality is a part of the slow equation, articulations of slow fashion aspire to make slow fashion common. Lucy Seigle, equates slow fashion with the sort of mostly industrial production network that existed in England (and elsewhere) until a few decades ago. It was

...a rather impressive peacetime army of tailors, machinists, cutter, finishers, colourists, weavers and of course designers. They were served by the sort of infrastructure, of farmers producing sheep for wool, slaughterhouses producing for the leather trade, cobblers, menders and recyclers (who in those days took the more prosaic form of rag and bone men), that today's sustainable style warriors can only dream about (To Die For 12).

Considering the above, the tag Slow Fashion stretches to allow for many different sometimes discrete factors and modes that alleviate the negative aspects of making, selling, and wearing of garments. While a pure model of slow fashion does not yet exist, from couture through the discounted mass-market, examples of what might be considered slower fashion do.

What would fashion look like if people again wore clothes that were made, not just cut or sewn, or repurposed, but completed created in their community? Well-known designer Isaac Mizrahi's experimentation with salmon skin, Camilla Norrback's emphasis on eco-friendlier wool and linen textile production, Samant Chauhan's work with handwoven "raw" silk, or Proenza-Schouler's collections that are sewn from unique artisanal fabrics are just a few of the hundreds of hints at localization in the luxury category. Many and more and more small producers, such as From Somewhere, Junky Styling, and TRAIIDremade are repurposing and upcycling textiles to produce unique and popular garments and accessories. Experimental enterprises offering fashion alternatives such as the San Francisco based Permacouture, the demonstration project The One-Hundred Mile Suit by artist Kelly Cobb, or the internationally focused low-tech/high-tech clothing business called IOU. Congruently, the DIY (Do It Yourself) movement is flourishing. The continuing proliferation of home knitting in Europe and North America is frequently given as a marker of a new fashion ethos, as is the vibrant revival of vintage and used clothing. Fair(er) trade is paramount to many fashion companies. Pioneers in this realm such as People Tree have gained strength, visibility and sales. Together with the many other thousands of small-scale makers they are forming what I will call a "long nose-to-tail"³ fashion economy. At a corporate level, initiatives abound in the march to

³ Long nose-to-tail is my coinage referring to Chris Anderson's labeling of the new long-tail economy that is comprised of the large quantity of people who were previously out of the core "target" of production who are now specifically reachable through the Internet and related technologies. Long-nose-to tail attempts to

sustainability, and these actions might be seen as part of a overly broad definition of slow fashion, even if the overarching business model is that of mass production and time-efficiency. Global giants, including Walmart, Nike and H&M, by virtue of their huge scale and established focus on growth, rank in the top ten of organic cotton purchasers. Primarily through their huge orders, global organic cotton sales have increased about forty percent each year since 2001 (Textile Exchange). Few or no businesses selling clothing on the global market are not concerned to some degree with environmental and social responsibility.

The categorization of these changes is underway. Black's 2008 Eco-Chic, showed a diverse collection of case-studies of eco-friendlier fashion; Brown's 2010 Eco-Fashion conveniently organizes very often overlapping trends into five categories: community and fair trade; ecological and slow design; recycle, reuse, and redesign; new models; and designer and corporate initiatives. Similarly, the 2010 exhibition Eco-Fashion: Going Green, at The Museum at FIT, used six logos to identify half a dozen themes within as conceived of by its curatorial leaders Jennifer Farley and Colleen Hill. These were: repurposing and recycling; material origins; dyeing and production; quality of craftsmanship; labor practices; and treatment of animals. Insights into the green fashion business have been shared by many in The Future Fashion White Papers (Hoffman). In her 2010 article Slow Fashion: An Invitation for Change?, Fletcher states that creating slow fashion, as was creating slow fashion's older sibling Slow Food, will require commitment to truly macro-economic logic:

Above all else, slow culture is an invitation to think about systems change in the fashion sector and to question the role of economic growth, underlying values, and worldviews in fashion so that a different and truly "richer" society develops. It does this by framing the fashion sector as a subsystem of the larger system of economics, society, and planetary ecosystems and recognizing that in order to change fashion, economic and social practices that shape, limit, and give meaning to the sector have to be part of [if not the essence of] the fashion debate.

VÄXBO LIN

Context

Växbo is a small hamlet in Hälsingland, Sweden, some 270 kilometers northwest of Stockholm. Hälsingland, a historical province that is now part of the Norrland region, is an area well known for its eighteenth and nineteenth century flax cultivation and linen production. It goes without saying that Sweden is today a highly developed country, but it was later than other European countries to industrialize. According to Brück, "nonprofessional handicraft production of textiles and garments prevailed until the second half of the nineteenth century, when the boom began for the textile industries, lasting about one hundred years" (7). It useful here to note that it is still not unusual to find in modern Sweden traces and re-incarnations of this handcraft tradition, what in Swedish is called *hemslojd*. Urban and rural shops, notably Svensk Hemslojd in Stockholm, and others throughout Sweden, sell high-quality handmade textile goods, and not only to tourists. Weaving is a somewhat popular hobby, and basic textile arts are still taught in many Swedish primary schools.

During the industrial revolutionary era, cotton, wool, and linen fabric production became centered in particular areas. The region surrounding the southwest city of Borås experienced the first wave of textile industrialization in 1870 with the introduction of cotton

meld that idea with the popular culinary phrase "nose-to-tail" to indicate the delights of frugality within sustainable-gastronomy imperatives.

manufacturing. Further north, the wool industry became centered in the city of Norrköping, and the industrial manufacturing of linen took hold in the south-west and north-east area including Hälsingland. But for many previous centuries, indeed millennia before various forms of industrialization occurred, flax, the plant that produces linen fiber, was grown throughout most of Sweden (Jonsson). Archeological finds show that flax was cultivated in southern Europe since around 7000 BCE (Heckett in Collins and Ollerenshaw); in more northern areas including modern-day UK and Ireland since Neolithic times (Fairweather and Ralston); and in Denmark from about 1600 BCE. European linen was traded with China at least since 1300, according to one source because it was “the only western article that could bear the cost of transportation as far as Peking” (Lopez in Collins and Ollerenshaw). Jonsson, in her study of linen production in Sweden, describes the proto-industrial system of seventeenth century Hälsingland as

a complicated network of mutual dependence and competition between different actors such as flax-growing and linen-trading farmers, peasants' wives and poor widows working as spinners and scutchers, local town merchants also trading in linen, and line-buying wholesalers in Stockholm (210).

Jonsson refers to the eighteenth century as the golden age of linen manufacturing in Europe, with an increase in manufacture and exportation in the important linen producing countries. In Sweden during this time there was also increased production and commerce, though exports apparently did not occur. In certain regions of the country “the production of linen came to be the most important livelihood beside farming, and linen from those areas was sold and distributed all over the country” (209). As was the case in other parts of the continent, the beginning of the early nineteenth century is the beginning of the end for almost all of the Swedish linen industry. Over this period, a series of events, including the growing demand for cotton, competition from the Russian Empire, disturbances of war, the Great Depression, and opportunities for earning in the timber industry brought about a greatly diminished market. Later changes in domestic attitudes and environmental concerns eventually caused all commercial cultivation of flax for fiber to cease (Collins and Ollerenshaw; Jonsson). The tradition of giving linen dowries lingered into the twentieth century, but in Sweden flax grown for fiber ended by 1965 (FAOUN). Interestingly, Sweden is today the ninth largest producer of linseed in the world, albeit its output is a tiny fraction of the production share leader Canada.

Today there are only a handful of commercial linen fabric weaveries in Sweden. Among them are four small companies: Ekelunds in Västra Götaland, founded in 1692; Klässbols in Värmland, founded in the early twentieth century; Hälsinge Linneväveri in Hälsingland, founded in 1980s, and Växbo Lin founded in 1989. Judging from their marketing, self-presentations and the characteristics of the actual textiles, all of these manufacturers take considerable pride in their heritage, social significance, and technical methods. All four necessarily use imported yarns or imported fiber. Together they offer a range of home furnishings from luxury table linens through eco-elegant dishrags. Similar to the surviving interest in hemslojd, appreciation for the specific tactile, visual, and durable qualities of linen goods remains in contemporary Swedish culture. It is common for Swedish apartment houses and homes to have a mangle, the hand powered or electric machines that are used to flatten linen fabrics. In the author's Swedish apartment building's shared laundry area, there are four fabric straightening and flattening devices: an iron, a *lakanshållare* (sheetholder) for pulling fabric taught; an early twentieth century heavy duty room size mangle with extra beams and surrounding wide tables for folding; and a smaller electric mangle that works very well for napkins and tablecloths. While it is true that many fewer people than in previous generations

now use these devices, for those who care about linen they are still relied upon to create the sheen, the flat crisp hand and knäckebröd-like drape, of linen fabric.

Material and Immaterial Value

In 2011, a visitor to Hälsingland would discover a heavily forested mountainous area, and would likely be enchanted by red-rose painted timber bridges, sheds, farmhouses, and mansions situated throughout the flatter areas of the landscape. Many of these buildings are decorated with strongly colored genre and floral motifs first-painted in an earlier time. Linen fabric fragments of local origin have been identified from the third century (Sweden Next World Heritage Sites). Now with about 15 employees, and the two owners, Växbo Lin was opened in 1989 as the dream incarnate of Rolf Åkerlund. At a time when the local linen industry was virtually extinct, Åkerlund's passion was to restore not only the physical spinning and weaving processes to the area, but the intangible community-culture that it had previously fostered.

My parents' flax farm in Växbo must have made a big impression on me. The women's hands that pulled the flax, the smell of flax retting in the lake and on the drying racks, and on the roof of the chapel.

I remember the flax breaks' monotonous thump through Växbo Valley during quiet autumn evenings. Then, after some years of absence from the homestead, I returned to Växbo with a growing enthusiasm to develop the linen tradition.

One thing led to another and a collection of enthusiasts undertook to build a modern industry for linen processing. It is with some measure of pride that we spin and weave in Växbo, well aware of the historical legacy we are entrusted to pass on (Växbo Lin).

Åkerlund's awareness of the cultural contribution reverberates two decades later as the concept of material prosperity is being reconciled with new formulations of prosperity that factor in less tangible aspects such as quality of life and happiness (see Stiglitz). Indeed, the feeling of buying a culturally identifiable product is key to the development of this business whose niche products' represent a far more vertically integrated and reasonable supply network than the majority of manufacturers of "similar" products.

In 2005 Hanna and Jacob Bruce, Stockholmers with family roots in the area and backgrounds in human resources and graphic design, took ownership. In an interview in *Vävmagisinet*, Hanna Bruce describes the chance re-meeting with Åkerlund that led the couple to buy the business. After having been a tour guide at the factory when a teenager, she had had a dream about one day running the company. While visiting Dalarna on their second wedding anniversary, Hanna accidentally met Åkerlund and joked that she was ready to buy the factory; coincidentally, Åkerlund had said that morning to his wife that he was ready to sell (15). Although neither she nor her husband had textile backgrounds, they believed they had a chance and committed to new lives. With the important collaboration of the designer Ingela Berntsson, the team has updated the product line. Their current range of products is mostly for household use: tablecloths, napkins, dishtowels, yardage, towel, but they also are selling clothing. All of their fabrics exhibit a design ethos that clearly values simplicity. Many of the fabrics have clean stripe patterns and precise twill variations that are a hallmark of cloth made with bast fiber. The current collection shows off elegant natural-color fibers and many bright dyed colors, including a sunny yellow, a pine green, and a rich pink that would be easy to associate with the regional flora. In the area of innovating in texture and fabric care needs, Berntsson has created a kind of substantial linen crepe toweling that is highly absorbent and needs no mangling to look good. A signature item has become their small dishcloth, now sold

along with other products of theirs in many museum and gift shops in Sweden. This dishcloth is made in a large variety of colors of strong yarns that form a fairly stable open weave. In the opinion of this writer, it is effective and pleasant to use. The marketing information connected with this product reminds users that the fabric can be tossed into the compost heap after its active life has expired. Berntsson relates that in her childhood she was forming her thoughts about nature. The fabrics that Berntsson, who trained at The Swedish School of Design and Crafts, designs exhibit a master's understanding of linen's innate physical characteristics. Here she speaks of the fiber's aesthetic properties:

...unbleached, the natural colours of linen range from a warm beige to grey, depending on the growth conditions of the flax, the soil, the climate and the retting. Ever-changing colours, representing life itself. Eternally beautiful, these are designs for each and every day throughout a lifetime (Selvege).

...it is more beautiful the more it is used, also an aspect of sustainability. You don't have to buy new stuff. I often think of young people buying a handtowel of unbleached linen, to use for the rest of their life (Gustavsson).

According to Gustavsson, Berntsson “felt it important for the products to have some connections with the factory surroundings” (17) and spent time in Hälsingland visiting heritage centers and museums. “People used a lot of linen in Hälsingland, and also appreciated it by taking care of it and saving it.” says Berntsson.

The Växbo Lin factory building, a large red-painted shed, holds the mid-century restored spinning and weaving machines that were brought to Sweden from France by Åkerlund. They make a lot of noise and break down not infrequently, but they have a nostalgic charm and are well cared for. Compared to modern machinery, these instruments seem a part of an almost craft like process. Because of their age and the challenges of maintaining the looms, the volume of irregular fabric is high. Hanna Bruce estimates flawed fabric at about thirty percent of production. At the factory sales outlet both first quality items at full price and seconds at a discount are available. Set about a thirty-minute drive from Bollnäs, a city of under thirty thousand people, the small rural spot where the factory is also includes a pub, historic farm buildings and manufacturing sheds, which are connected via paths and small roads through the woods. Summer time is by far their peak period, with an astonishing number of Swedish and international visitors each year, most of whom arrive in tour busses. On the whole, sales volume has nearly tripled in the years since changing hands to the Bruces. Hanna described concern about having had to raise prices, but their sales have not suffered. The business has recently opened a sales and showroom in Stockholm, and Växbo Lin's output is now sold through approximately 400 retailers around the world (Vävmagasinet; Hanna Bruce). The company's marketing materials are attractive, friendly, and convey aspects of their product and community's story. To complete the experience, at the point of sale a purchase can be gift wrapped in simple, “eco-evocative” paper, a decorative sprig of dried flax seedpods and a simple blue flax flower label. Hanna Bruce shares some of the material and immaterial values that go into their work:

It's not the quality of linen we want to alter, but ways of thinking about linen. And we are aware of the cultural heritage aspect. Though we don't want to get stuck in it. Our main assets on the market are that our production is based in Sweden, and we do eco-labelled high quality products. And our history too.

Being able to tour the factory, meet the workers, take joy in the natural beauty of the location, in other words to connect (if briefly) with the community and context of production self-evidently and importantly increases the intangible worth of the products.

Hanna's Stripped Dress and the Local Challenge

Växbo could be considered a slower rather than a slow business. To take one example, the Bruces would prefer to use locally grown flax, thereby making it slower, more local. But for the reasons described earlier, there is no fiber flax commercially grown in Sweden. Currently the spinnery uses fiber from France (Vävmagasinet), and additional yarns are imported from Italy when the pace of weaving exceeds, as was the case in pre-industrial times, the rate of spinning. Asked if it would be possible to do the whole process locally, Hanna indicates the lack of cultivation and infrastructure:

As it stands today, there are no [flax] processing plants left in Scandinavia, and the amount of raw material we use is far too small to make building a new plant viable. But nothing is impossible and we would be the first to welcome it.

Furthermore, there are questions surrounding reliability, quality, and even the environmental soundness of cultivating and processing fiber flax in modern day Hälsingland. The impact of the water retting process that was used in times past is said to cause damaging effluents. Could a safe retting system be created? A modern precedent for local growing in a similar industrial situation and climate existed. The twenty person Jokiiipin Pallava linen weavery in Finland, provided eco-certified textiles from Finnish-grown flax for a period of time, but no longer, stating that, “In Finland, the cultivation and continuation refinement of linen has been downgrading again since the temporary revival in the 1990s.” (www.jokiiipinpellava.fi).

Competing pressures make the creating of a healthy supply and use chain extremely difficult. How does a company, even one that were free from financial constraints, determine the overall value of choosing between stringently organic fiber or that which is grown using eco-friendlier practices? In view of overall life cycle analysis the answer is rarely clear, and the Bruces, along with millions of other producers and users struggle to find the best route. In light of the concept of living within carrying capacity, should this small business limit its material growth to the size of the existing factory?

Illustrating more of the choices that need to be made in the vague and overlapping territories of “superficial” and “structural beauty”, I come back to color. The dyeing stage of textile manufacturing is generally the most environmentally harmful. Green chemistry is in the eyes of many the best road to sustainability. Others make a case for a grand-scale return to using plants, mollusks, and minerals. In the food, fashion and cosmetics and other industries, there is a marked trend toward the use of natural dyes and natural pigments. But as with other debates between naturally or synthetically derived substances, establishing which methods are best is often problematic. Växbo Lin either dyes its self-produced yarns with a nearby synthetic dye house or buys them in from an Italian yarn house that uses the same fibers. As mentioned earlier, the vivid color palette makes an appealing and well-selling assortment. Would their business, their employees, their community, the world, be better served by using the more nuanced and less predictable colors that result from natural sources? If a decision were then made to use natural pigments, would it make aesthetic or carbon emission sense to import to Sweden pigment produced by the harvesting of a thriving but invasive bivalve on the coast of France or through the local hand cultivation of weld and fungi?

Few of Växbo Lin's textile products are clothing, but two pieces made with their own linen fabric stand out. A pink and white bouncy flaxen dress that Hanna often wears, and Jacob's subtly colored no-mangle shirt. They are not just tangible good-looking objects; they seem to be flagging a broader vision. During my first visit to the Hälsingland outlet, a dress form displayed a plain green linen scarf, a striped linen dress, a flappy linen jacket, and a linen purse with a linen rope strap that in a bygone era might have been used to raise a heavy sail. Together, Hanna's dress, Jacob's shirt, and the dress form's ensemble, on whole looked more

meaningful and more fashionable than most of the consciously “fashionable” fashion that I have seen in recent years in New York, London, Paris or Stockholm.

Fabricating a Future

Many have written, particularly of the slow food movement, there are considerable social, environmental and economic benefits that accrue from the ability to know and be a part of the “the who, what, where, when, why and how” of production and use. Like other more-localized textile producers Växbo Lin seems to be part of a fashion backlash against the dehumanizing effects of too much technology and unchecked globalization, but the mapping that I have thus far accomplished, has not included an ethnographic study or quantitative investigation that could contribute to proving or disproving the value of any one particular example of localized production and use. In sum, this work to date is perhaps what mathematician and pedagogue Caleb Gattegno would refer to as “putting words into circulation”⁴ while aware that their reverberation and reiteration will be what will allow the accretion of meaning.

A network of interconnected questions arises when pondering what truly slow/local/restorative fashion systems might emerge.

- How slow does fashion need to be to be slow? What sorts of slow fashion already exist? What are the measurable and immeasurable dimensions, the positive and negative values of such systems? How do they compare with best practice industrial systems?

- What levels of technology and degrees of sovereignty are appropriate at various points in a multi-local fashion world? What is the right balance between self-sufficiency and interdependence?

- As they once brought the world into an industrial economy, can textiles and fashion be leaders toward a restorative economy? If fashion as we know it cannot survive without a growth-based economy, can it transition to a “steady-state fashion” that would express the ideals of a new model of prosperity?

- If new forms of slow and local fashion can bypass or invert old forms of growth-fashion, what aesthetic form would these sorts of dress take? How would they feel and how would they function? Can attractiveness be synchronized with beauty if beauty necessarily enfold fundamental human concerns such as equity, well-being, and meaning? What values, visible and invisible, would slow fashion garments convey? With meaningful adaptations, could fast fashion also be slow fashion?

- What hundreds of practical actions, from education through changed logistics, from regulations through perhaps even a spiritual shift, will need to happen to build such a fashion?

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⁴ Through personal conversations with his wife Shakti Gattegno at a number of language-learning and education theory seminars and teacher-training workshops.

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