



## Critical review

## Systems of provision: Fast fashion and jeans



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## ABSTRACT

Using the example of jeans and the fast fashion sector, this critical review explores how systems of provision analysis can be used to understand geographical connections between spaces of production and places of consumption. The study of global commodity chains and production networks has proliferated in economic geography, yet the focus on transactions between places frequently omits to consider the material culture that surrounds processes of making and buying. In contrast, in cultural geography the meanings and transformations associated with 'following things' has explored the shifting meanings of commodities as well as personal experiences of shopping with a focus on signifying culture. Ben Fine's systems of provision approach can offer a more comprehensive analysis. Fine considers how the role of the consumer has emerged as well as the economic processes through which value is established in goods and is an inclusive way of examining the activities that connect consumption and production. Through discussing some of the recent and emerging work on denim jeans this review shows how a systems of provision approach can effectively map a 'fast fashion' system and provides a framework that can be applied to other economic geographies.

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## 1. Introduction

Geographers have long tried to map the connections between spaces of production and places of consumption. Harvey's (1990, p. 422) call for work to "get behind the veil, the fetishism of the market" influenced researchers, such as Hartwick (1998) who drew on earlier investigations in sociology (including Hopkins

and Wallerstein, 1986), and advanced a commodity chain approach to examining links between making and buying consumer goods. Ever more sophisticated and detailed quantitative analyses traced precise economic and material flows over time and space. The study of global chains proliferated in economic geography and business studies alike, explaining globalization in terms of Global Commodity Chains, Global Value Chains and Global Production Networks (Coe et al., 2008; Gereffi, 1999; Kaplinsky, 2000). Yet the focus on linear 'vertical' economic chains or networked nodes

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frequently omits to consider the material culture that surrounds process of production and retail (Hudson, 2008). One exception would be Carswell and De Neve (2013) who took a more ‘horizontal’ approach, considering social and cultural factors when conceptualizing labor agency in global production networks in clothing industries. Meanwhile, cultural geographers have announced that ‘everything is consumption’ (Gregson, 1995), and called for researchers to ‘follow things’ (Cook et al., 2004). A focus on ‘signifying culture’ and consumer products has explored the shifting cultural and personal meanings of commodities as they move through space rather than political economy. Such analysis recalls what Appadurai (1986) earlier dubbed ‘the social life of things’ or more recently ‘vibrant matter’ in the more than human geographies vein (Bennett, 2010).

A system of provision approach, first championed by economist Fine (2002), can offer a more comprehensive perspective for explaining the consumption of a particular good in a particular time and place. He drew on the broad tradition of Marxist economics, and called for researchers to look at the process outside of the borders of linear commodity chains, backwards to the historical events that determine regimes of production and consumption, while also combining cultural and political economy approaches to establish how value is produced in commodities. Fine would categorize individual production networks and commodity chains as specific ‘vertical’ structures of provision, with a potentially different ‘vertical’ *system of provision* associated with each consumer good: such as a particular pair of Levi’s 501 blue jeans. His approach though goes further and considers the interaction of horizontal factors which shape patterns of consumption, for instance the social, cultural and economic factors that led to the spread of jeans around the world, and the emergence of fast fashion manufacturing and retail. ‘Fast fashion’ is a term coined by retailers to encapsulate how trends move rapidly from the catwalk to the store. Manufacturing is quick and cheap, and consumers are encouraged to continually consume ever-changing collections of affordable clothes, such as a certain cut of jeans available only for a limited time in GAP or Zara. Rapidly evolving trends shaped by the fashion industry, various media and the broader culture that surrounds consumption, place tremendous stress on production systems in the labor intensive clothing sector. Workers are compelled to produce garments quickly and relentlessly to meet deadlines for export (Seabrook, 2015). Jeans, which are both relatively uniform garments, but also ones that can be tailored to convey different trends and cultural messages, are a mainstay of fast fashion retailers. To understand their contemporary popularity from a system of provision perspective we need to appreciate their historical origins.

A system of provision therefore “is taken to denote the articulation of economic and social factors that give rise both to the level and composition of consumption . . . and the meaning with which it is endowed” (Fine and Leopold, 1993; p. 33). Consumer choice is historically determined and influenced by a broader – horizontal – social context, rather than being driven by consumer demand for a certain thing, or the presence of a single commodity chain or production network which stimulates consumer behavior (e.g. via advertising). Fine (2002) considers how the role of the consumer has emerged as well as the economic processes through which value is established in goods and is an inclusive way of examining the “chain of activity that attaches consumption to the production that makes it possible” (2002; p. 79). Fine’s idea first gained prominence in *The World of Consumption* (with Leopold, 1993), but has largely been neglected by geographers. What makes the systems of provision approach so appealing from a critical perspective is the effective and clear engagement with historical materialism and especially the production of value. Understating a jeans system of provision means charting how jeans

have become a popular choice of clothing for millions of people and explaining where and how different processes are undertaken to make jeans into a commodity. Rather than forensically detailing the vertical journey of the same cotton bolls from farm gate to retail floor, related processes are discussed in this truncated example. Materials pass around the world and as cotton threads are woven into denim, and denim is cut and sewn in to jeans, the commodities gather and attract value, but we have to look carefully beyond the fetishism of the thing and the market to understand how value is socially constructed.

## 2. Jeans system of provision

### 2.1. Origin

Modern blue jeans began in the 1870s when Levi Strauss improved the design of simple trousers. Strauss riveted strong twill denim to prevent tearing and added five pockets and belt loops, which inspired the standard jean style (Ross, 2008). Hardwearing jeans soon became the pants of choice for the American working man in the Fordist phase of industrial development. In the 1950s and 1960s jeans began to emerge not just as utilitarian work wear, but also as a casual and subversive mode of dress for women as well as men. Denim gained notoriety in youth culture and global popularity. However, jeans were not just passively taken up by other cultures imitating America; they have grown to have their own local meanings and significance (Miller, 2010). Toward the end of the twentieth century jeans began to lose their subversive qualities and became entrenched as a near default wardrobe item. Jeans are marketed at every price point from designer lines to bargain basement. Rather than thinking about their popularity as being either led by customers’ desires or an outcome of producer stimulated demand, it is better to consider how jeans perform a function in the circuit of industrial capital. The spheres of production and consumption influence one another as the market for, and the use value of, jeans “are shaped according to the modern relations of production and in turn intervene to modify those relations” (Harvey, 2006, p. 7). The *use value* of jeans is not incidental, but governed the initial role they played in the agricultural and industrial development of America. Hard-wearing denim pants were practical, reliable and very useful. A global production infrastructure developed to mass manufacture a robust and affordable garment. Jeans are both a product of industrial development and in-turn has shaped how industry developed (Brooks, 2015).

### 2.2. Design

A successful designer knows it is important to furnish jeans with the right stylistic notes to compliment the familiar denim blueprint. For instance, one of the distinctive properties of contemporary jeans is the way in which millions of pairs are deliberately distressed and bleached-out, faded or torn. This designer’s trick establishes within jeans values of authenticity, which depending on the social register, can relate back to earlier popular history. The material culture that surrounds jeans is thus vital to understand (Miller, 2010). Many jeans are deliberately made to look like the worn work wear of cowboys from the turn of the twentieth century or have the tears and fraying of 1970s punk costumes. The designer is important in forming the symbolic value of jeans. While it is true that there is some correlation between relatively objective notions of quality and price, the association rapidly falls away as the retail price point climbs toward 100 dollars. Designers in all price brackets play a vital role and increase the social value of jeans so that the retail price no longer represents the cost of the labor and materials involved in manufacturing (Brooks, 2015).

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