Journal of Historical Geography 39 (2013) 99–112

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

Geographies of the British government's wartime Utility furniture scheme, 1940–1945

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Abstract

The Second World War Utility furniture scheme represented a distinctive moment in the changing geographies of the twentieth-century British furniture industry. The scheme enabled the British state to direct the entire furniture commodity chain, from the regulation of timber supplies through to the management of final consumption. Whilst there has been some discussion of Utility within the context of modernism in design, the paper explores the broader historical geographies of Utility furniture. We demonstrate the ways in which state activity in wartime reconfigured socio-economic networks of production, distribution and consumption. The paper's assessment of the Utility scheme reveals the importance of historical contingency in commodity chain dynamics as well as the role of the national state as a key organising agent.

Keywords: Utility; Furniture industry; Commodity chains; State; Britain

The Second World War Utility furniture scheme represented a distinctive moment in the changing geographies of the twentieth-century British furniture industry. Planned through the latter part of 1942 and implemented in 1943, the scheme enabled the state to direct the entire furniture commodity chain, from the regulation of timber supplies to the management of final consumption. The wartime office of the Board of Trade specified a small set of designs for manufacture, designated individual firms for the production of Utility furniture, and controlled distribution through the issue of buying permits to households. When the scheme began, allocations of 'units' were provided to newly married couples setting up their first home and to existing households who had lost furniture as a result of bombing, whilst later in the war the families of pregnant women and/or with growing children also were prioritised.[1] The Utility furniture scheme continued in a strict sense until 1948, with a modified 'Freedom of design' phase lasting until the end of price control and quality assurance in 1952.[2]

Whilst the Utility period may appear to be a relatively short episode, it was shaped by concerns about the furniture industry which stretched back to the late nineteenth century, including disquiet with poor working conditions in sweated parts of the trade.[3] The reorganisation of the industry under the Utility scheme also was bound up with debates about the value of 'good design' and a need for design reform, which continued to frame assessments of the British furniture industry through the 1950s and 1960s. In part, the Utility scheme sought to address contemporary critiques such as Pevsner's which decried parts of the furniture trade for lacking design skill and reproached retailers for offering 'cheap goods' to the public.[4] When the scheme was introduced by the Board of Trade in 1942, a press announcement implied a need for design reform: 'the function of the [Advisory] Committee [on Utility Furniture] will be to produce specifications for furniture of good, sound construction in simple but agreeable designs for sale at reasonable prices, and ensuring the maximum economy of raw materials and labour.'[5]

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[1] Board of Trade, Utility Furniture. General Policy, The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA) BT 64/2052. See also M. Denney, Utility furniture and the myth of Utility 1943–1948, in: J. Attfield (Ed.) *Utility Reassessed: The Role of Ethics in the Practice of Design*, Manchester, 1999, 110–124.
[2] C.D. Edwards, *Twentieth-century Furniture: Materials, Manufacture and Markets*, Manchester, 1994, 141.
[3] First report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System, PP 1888 (361). After the war, the Board of Trade explicitly argued that wartime changes such as the establishment of a Trade Board and 'the improvement of organisation of the trade unions and employers during the war have ended this condition.' That is, state control of the furniture industry had been important in discouraging sweated labour (Board of Trade, *Working Party Reports: Furniture*, London, 1946, 15).
[4] N. Pevsner, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*, Cambridge, 1937, 38 and passim.
[5] Board of Trade, 8 July 1942, cited in Geffrye Museum, *Utility Furniture and Fashion 1941–1951*, London, 1974, 12.

0305-7488/$ – see front matter
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2012.07.003

Design historical approaches have situated the emergence of Utility design in relation to both modernism and the Arts and Crafts movement, as well as tracing connections between the Utility scheme and state-sponsored efforts to encourage 'good design' such as the establishment of the Design and Industries Association, the Council for Art and Industry and the Council of Industrial Design.[6] Some accounts have read the aims and intentions of the Utility furniture scheme as a means of attempting to shift British attitudes—of the industry itself as well as the wider public—away from 'traditional' and towards 'modern' designs.[7] In this paper we situate the scheme within the context of a broader system of wartime controls at a time of deep crisis. Faced with constraints at all points in the furniture commodity chain, the British state became involved in a wholesale reimagining of the geographies of furniture production, distribution and consumption. Early in the Second World War, the state was compelled to engage with acute shortages of finished consumer goods as well as the primary raw materials of timber, plywood and veneers.[8] Retailing and distribution of furniture also required control and intervention, given that the transport of bulky goods over long distances placed demands on scarce petrol resources. Finally—and not least important—leading furniture manufacturing firms were drawn into war work, leaving limited plant and labour capacity in remaining small and medium sized firms. Domestic furniture production was restructured via the 'designation' of individual firms in particular cities and regions to produce different types of Utility furniture (i.e. chairs, sideboards, wardrobes etc.) in order to distribute manufacturing capacity more evenly across the whole of Britain.[9] Careful specification of a narrow range of designs sought to ensure that manufacturers achieved economy of materials and were able to provide a uniform quality of product to consumers at fixed prices. As a 1942 Board of Trade memorandum written shortly before the introduction of the Utility scheme stated, 'price control of new furniture cannot achieve maximum effectiveness until there is complete control of all stages of production from the raw material to the finished article.'[10]

The central aim of this paper is to elaborate and interpret changing geographies of the British furniture industry during the wartime Utility period.[11] The paper makes two important contributions. First, we develop the Utility case as a means of foregrounding the role of the state in reconfiguring commodity chains, and underscoring 'the implications of this insight for appreciating the historically contingent and politically constructed nature of chains.'[12] The vast majority of research on late twentieth-century commodity chains and networks has emphasised the coordination of chains by lead firms (or transnational corporation networks).[13] However, the example of Utility furniture offers the possibility of excavating the role played by the national state not merely as an institutional backdrop to the making and remaking of commodity chains but rather as an important 'organising agent.'[14] The paper seeks to develop new perspectives on geographies of commodity chains and the role of the state: that is, not only do states regulate commodities as they cross territorial boundaries, but also—as explored here—they may act to reconstitute commodity chain dynamics at different scales. Insofar as an investigation of Utility furniture during the Second World War illuminates a distinct power shift away from manufacturers and retailers and towards the national state, our account lends weight to Bair's argument that 'historical analysis… helps to avoid the temptation of seeing the organisation of contemporary commodity chains as necessary or inevitable….'[15]

Second, the case of Utility furniture provides a valuable window onto commodity chain dynamics at a time of crisis, sharply contrasting with contemporary global commodity chain analyses which emphasise 'the durability, expansion and institutionality of global markets.'[16] Further, the paper's focus on a distinctive type of crisis—that is, wartime—demonstrates the ways in which military activity reconfigures socio-economic networks of production, distribution and consumption. As Evenden has observed in the case of the aluminium commodity chain, wartime restructuring

> redrew the boundaries of industrial geography and geopolitics; mobilised distant peoples and places and environments;

[6] See J. Woodham, Britain Can Make It and the history of design, in: P.J. Maguire, J. Woodham (Eds), *Design and Cultural Politics in Britain: The Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946*, London, 1997, 17–28; Denney, Utility furniture and the myth of Utility 1943–1948 (note 1); F. MacCarthy, *All Things Bright and Beautiful: Design In Britain 1830 to Today*, London, 1972.

[7] See J. Attfield (Ed.), *Utility Reassessed: The Role of Ethics in the Practice of Design*, Manchester, 1999; J. Attfield, *The Role of Design in the Relationship Between Furniture Manufacture and its Retailing 1939–1965 with Initial Reference to the Furniture Firm of J. Clarke*, Unpublished doctoral thesis, Brighton, 1992; H. Dover, *Home Front Furniture: British Utility Design 1941–1951*, Aldershot, 1991; Geffrye Museum, *Utility Furniture and Fashion 1941–1951* (note 5); Gordon Russell interviewed in Utility: how a wartime government hired its own designers to give the furniture industry a compulsory range of consumer products, *Design* 309 (1974) 63–71.

[8] E.L. Hargreaves and M.M. Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade*, London, 1952, 521. Veneer is a composite material comprised of thin layer of wood (often more expensive and/or with a more decorative grain) glued to a thicker layer of solid wood.

[9] For reasons of space and consistency as well as limitations in the archival record, the paper's discussion omits Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland was not part of the original Utility scheme although the scheme's introduction was considered by the Board of Trade in late 1943/early 1944. There was concern that the Northern Irish furniture industry was insufficiently developed to support the scheme: 'not more than one third of the firms there are capable of producing to our Utility specifications' (Memorandum, *Furniture Production in Northern Ireland*, n.d. (circa 1944), 1, Board of Trade, Utility Furniture Policy 1944–1946, TNA BT 64/2825). Throughout the paper, we use British to refer to the operation of the Utility scheme in England, Scotland and Wales.

[10] Price Control of New Furniture. Memorandum from O.H. Frost, Vice-Chairman of the Central Price Regulation Committee, 30 June 1942, Board of Trade, Advisory Committee on Utility Furniture, TNA BT 64/1835.

[11] The paper primarily focuses upon the period until 1945, although reference is made to the immediate post-war years where appropriate. The 1948–1952 period is addressed in Attfield, *The Role of Design in the Relationship Between Furniture Manufacture and its Retailing 1939–1965 with Initial Reference to the Furniture Firm of J. Clarke* (note 7); J. Attfield, Freedom of design, in: J. Attfield (Ed.) *Utility Reassessed: The Role of Ethics in the Practice of Design*, Manchester, 1999, 203–220.

[12] J. Bair, Global commodity chains: genealogy and review, in: J. Bair (Ed.), *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research*, Stanford, 2009, 1–3; the quotation is from page 19.

[13] Debates about the relative merits of commodity 'chains' versus 'networks' as well as a survey of the expansive literatures on global commodity chains, global value chains, global production networks and systems of provision are beyond the scope of this paper. On the conceptualisation of chains and networks, see D. Leslie and S. Reimer, Spatialising commodity chains, *Progress in Human Geography* 23 (1999) 401–420; A. Hughes and S. Reimer, Introduction, in: A. Hughes, S. Reimer (Eds), *Geographies of Commodity Chains*, London, 2004, 1–16. A recent review is provided in Bair, Global commodity chains (note 12). Our analysis in this paper connects most closely to the early articulation in T. K. Hopkins and I. Wallerstein, Commodity chains in the world-economy prior to 1800, *Review* 10 (1986) 157–170.

[14] Bair, Global commodity chains (note 12), 11. See also Smith et al.'s argument that within work on global commodity chains, 'the state, if it appears at all, is little more than a contextual backdrop colouring the particularities of national industrial orders' A. Smith, A. Rainnie, M. Dunford, J. Hardy, R. Hudson and D. Sadler, Networks of value, commodities and regions: reworking divisions of labour in macro-regional economies, *Progress in Human Geography* 26 (2002) 41–63; the quotation is from page 46.

[15] Bair, Global commodity chains (note 12), 18.

[16] P.A. Hough, Disarticulations and commodity chains: cattle, coca and capital accumulation along Columbia's agricultural frontier, *Environment and Planning A* 43 (2011) 1016–1034, page 1016; see also J. Bair and M. Werner, Commodity chains and the uneven geographies of global capitalism, *Environment and Planning A* 43 (2011) 988–997.