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Letter from the Editors: The Past and Present of Fashion Cities

In the past decade or so, discussion has increasingly addressed the need to rip apart the idea of a single fashion history stemming from Europe and North America which opened up with the outsourcing of the post-war period (Ling, Lorusso, and Segre Reinach [2019](#)). Research has presented an open perspective, engaging with fashion beyond the boundaries of the traditional fashion capitals, considering skills, specialisms and placemaking strategies, fostered in diverse locations across the globe (Breward and Gilbert [2006](#); Skov [2011](#); Brydges, Hracs, and Lavanga [2018](#)). Fashion affects elites and non-elites; cities in core and

periphery areas alike. Furthermore, the structure of the fashion industry has varied from historical period to historical period and between cities, regions, and nations (Breward and Gilbert 2006; Rantisi 2004). The industry is composed of complex transnational supply chains which encompass textile and clothing manufacturing, the organization of temporary clusters like trade shows and fashion weeks, and (digital) media management (Skov 2006; Rocamora 2017; Wubs and Maillet 2017; Blaszczyk and Wubs 2018; Lavanga 2018; Huang and Janssens 2019). While scholars across the globe have enriched the geography of fashion by studying locations beyond the “big four,” there remains a need for better understanding of fashion centers from global and evolutionary perspectives.

The trope of the “fashion capital” or “fashion city” is used frequently, but scholars have only recently begun to discuss its articulation in different forms. Studies of fashion cities have looked at the spaces and agglomerations of fashion design, manufacture, marketing, and retail, but the relationships between these different urban spaces, and their fluctuations in form remain a growing, but under-researched, area of consideration. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, combining business history, economic history, fashion studies and economic geography, this special issue aims to present a burgeoning perspective. It focuses on the spatial and transnational dimensions of the industry, taking a long-term historical perspective—from Paris in the late nineteenth century to Turin and London in the early-mid twentieth century—while also providing provocations addressing how we could define and study fashion cities. The first versions of these articles, along with similar works covering a broad swathe of global fashion cities and their businesses, were presented at two seminars at Erasmus University Rotterdam, “Exploring Fashion Capitals in the Long Twentieth Century” in December 2017 and “Business History of Fashion: The State of the Art” in November 2018. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC) and the Erasmus Research Institute of Management (ERIM) for funding these two seminars. Thanks also go to all presenters and participants, including the audience of students, scholars and practitioners for their engagement and comments on the presentations and articles.

The first article of this special issue introduces us to the rise and evolution of the first Italian fashion capital, the city of Turin during the period 1900–1960. Business historians Elisabetta Merlo and Mario Perugini place the rise of Turin within a broader context, considering external sources of change represented by the evolution of regulatory frameworks and public policies at the national level, especially those of the Fascist period. Their analysis goes beyond narratives of local level path-dependence; relating the case of Turin to technological innovation (i.e. the development of the man-made fiber industry in Italy, in

particular, the production of rayon and lanital), the formation of new institutions (i.e. Ente Nazionale della Moda which would later become the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana) and organizations (i.e. the Salone Mercato Internazionale Abbigliamento) and the emergence of a new market for ready-to-wear. The rise of Turin as a fashion city is intertwined with the rise of an Italian industrial identity, of which Turin was the epicenter.

In the second paper, fashion historian Bethan Bide addresses London's repositioning from a production center to a symbolic fashion capital and this change's placement within a period of history often overlooked for its austerity label. Bide indicates how analysis of fashion beyond the upper echelons of couture can provide a greater understanding of the nature of fashion centers. She emphasizes how mid-market makers in the 1940s established the roots of London's symbolic and design-center status as a response to threats of outsourced manufacturing and policy recommendations. Moreover, the article uses extant garments as a methodological tool and source, presenting opportunities to advance studies of fashion businesses. This approach suggests that "the material" can be married with "the numeric" to better understand the history of fashion and fashion centers.

Media historian Sophie Kurkdjian broadens the understanding of Paris' nature as a fashion capital from that of a homogenous center radiating fashion outwards toward the rest of the world, to a melting pot where diverse skills, cultures, and inspirations came together to form what we know as French fashion, in both business and taste. Addressing France's background as a nation which strongly supported the development of specialized making practices, the author details their evolution from the time of Colbert and their role in fostering Paris as a fashion ecosystem during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These actions were supported by the formation of structures such as the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*, complemented by rife media representation of Paris as the center of the global fashion industry. Kurkdjian emphasizes the crucial contribution of foreign seamstresses and designers, the exchange of knowledge and skills, and the hybridization of styles, consumption habits, and industrial techniques made possible by streams of immigration. She suggests reconsidering Paris's position within a global history of fashion.

The final article of this special issue, written by urban and historical geographer David Gilbert and economic geographer Patrizia Casadei, aims to challenge uncritical use of the "fashion city" and "fashion capital" concepts. In their provocations the authors debunk the idea of a singular model of the fashion capital, proposing greater diversity in models that deal with the relationship between fashion and the city. Secondly, they suggest that fashion cities ought to be mapped in a way that better shows their geographical complexity. Thirdly, they emphasize that the combination of "fashion" and "city" puts too much emphasis

on fashion and does not do justice to the political context of urban centers. Lastly, they raise the question of periodization and shifts that have taken place in the fashion capitals of the twentieth century. This suggests that the relations between the symbolic value and the material reality of the main fashion cities in the world has constantly changed to the point that the link has become completely disconnected—a mythologized reality.

This special issue offers interesting implications in terms of theory and methodology. Theoretically, the articles provide fodder for the understanding of fashion capitals as chimeric locations made of entwined business ventures which may ideate, design, produce and market fashion in one location, but maintain key linkages beyond their city limits. Rather than providing a singular definition for the fashion city, the articles suggest that the idiosyncratic and place-specific characteristics of fashion reveal opportunities for greater understanding of international value networks, the impact of public policies, immigration and the like. Our special issue queries how fashion centers come into being, and how they change throughout time. The fashion city is not static, but a fluid entity which may maintain its moniker despite enacting a different form of fashion altogether. Methodologically, the articles point to the value of studying fashion in a more historical and international context. To delineate the rise and evolution of fashion centers and better understand the global history of fashion, they suggest (a) the re-bundling of fashion's more symbolic activities with the manufacturing of textiles and clothing (from physical to digital fabrication), and (b) the studying of the fashion city not in isolation, but in relation to broader national and international regulatory frameworks, policies and institutions.

Despite the acknowledged break between materiality and symbolism, and the emergence of new fashion centers which enlarge the polycentric geography of fashion, the “big four” fashion capitals still retain their power. Apparently, little has changed in the hierarchy of fashion cities (Godart 2014). And yet, the fashion industry's structure has been completely revolutionized by the rise of conglomerates, the mass integration of manufacturing and creation of global production networks, digitalization, and financialization. These forces of creative destruction which have reshaped the industry and yet again rendered it innovative, have in turn highlighted its conservative nature as the power structure has not shifted. To what extent this current status results from the engagement of existing institutions, regulatory frameworks, path dependency, good marketing, storytelling or corporate power warrants further research (Donzé and Wubs 2019).

As business historians and economic geographers, we are cautious to predict the future, but clearly, the rise of China as an economic superpower may create a cultural shift that could affect the power structure of the fashion industry. The growing emphasis on the creative industries and the role that these can play in value creation are clear to the


economic and political leadership of the People's Republic of China. China is no longer the global sweatshop. It has become the largest consumer market of the world with a significant interest in fashion and luxury, complemented by an increasing number of domestic fashion designers and brands (Ling and Segre Reinach 2018). Chinese brands excel in their domestic market but often have not expanded fully in the West, likely as it is not necessary. Shanghai's recent endeavors to become one of the fashion capitals of the world are closely linked to the global shifts of the industry, and the rise of China's star. Perhaps the re-bundling of the symbolic and material aspects of fashion, along with the restructuring of unsustainable global production networks would create new chances for old and new fashion capitals alike. This, in turn, begs the question of whether we should still think in terms of fashion capitals and cities. Should we rather explore the interrelation of diverse fashion systems and digital spaces, which may, in turn, change our understanding of not just fashion places, but also of fashion itself?

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