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**Fourth worlds and neo-Fordism:
American Apparel and the cultural economy of consumer anxiety**

Abstract

This article examines the strategies of the ‘sweatshop-free’ clothing company American Apparel in the context of ongoing debates over the cultural turn and cultural economy. American Apparel’s key selling point is that it does not outsource: it manufactures in Los Angeles, pays ‘good’ wages and provides healthcare, yet the workers are not unionised and the migrant labour it depends upon is often temporary. These same employees are used in promotional material to create its brand identity of an irreverent, hip and quasi-sexualised ‘community’ of consumers and workers.

A design- and brand-led company that nonetheless doesn’t see itself as a brand in any conventional sense, and markets itself as ‘transparent’, the company’s ethos turns on consumer anxiety towards the socio-economic injustices of post-Fordism. Indeed, it marks a partial return to Fordist modes of production by aiming to manufacture everything under one roof, whilst deploying modes of informality (and technology) stereotypically associated with the post-Fordist creative industries. This paper considers the complex dynamics of American Apparel’s emergence in a reflexive marketplace (in relation to what Callon has termed an ‘economy of qualities’) and discusses its problematic negotiations with ‘fourth worlds’, or the zones of exclusion Castells terms ‘the black holes of informational capitalism’.

Keywords: American Apparel * branding * defetishisation * ethical consumption * transparency effect *

Introduction

Over the last decade, the number of products labelled as ‘ethical’ or ‘fair’ has expanded in a marked fashion to become an increasingly visible niche market within Western contemporary consumer culture (Cohen 2003; Hilton 2003; Micheletti 2003). However, although an internationally agreed fair trade mark exists, it is by no means applied to all products competing within the ethical marketplace, and there is considerable debate about what constitutes ‘fair’ and what constitutes ‘ethical’ (Harrison *et al* 2005; Nicholls and Opal 2005). There is therefore currently lot of activity which might be understood, depending upon your political position and mode of analysis, as either *extending* the discursive terrain of ethical consumption, or as *exploiting* it. One particular example that occupies a conspicuous place along this faultline, and as such offers a means to throw the subject into some relief, is that of our case study, the Los Angeles-based clothing company American Apparel. A privately-owned company that produces all its goods under one roof and which promotes itself as both ‘brand-free’ and ‘sweatshop-free’, American Apparel has expanded rapidly across North America and Europe in recent years, thanks in large part to a highly effective and well-integrated marketing strategy that uses images of its employees to highlight the ‘transparency’ of the brand and its manufacturing process in comparison to its competitors.

The emergence of the company and the ambiguous cultural formation it is part of needs to be understood in the context of post-Fordist economic and cultural shifts. To put a complex and familiar story very baldly, unlike Fordist production systems, in which Western factories mass-produced standardised products for broad social categories organised mainly on the basis of class, post-Fordist companies outsourced the most routinized aspects of production overseas, making use of a combination of cheaper labour and ‘just-in-time’ production methods to produce shorter runs of more ‘niche’-targeted goods for consumers who were increasingly segmented into seemingly endless proliferations of lifestyle groupings (Aglietta 2001; Hall and Murray 1990; Lash and Urry 1994) The roles of design, marketing and advertising became particularly important to the extent that they were seen as both adding the greatest value to the end product, and as being responsible for the increasingly intricate calibration of supply and demand

(Brierley 2001; Julier 2000; Lury 2004). Instead of vertical organisation, corporations increasingly spread horizontally using synergy and globalised outsourcing, marking a new phase in long-established global divisions of labour.

That such global outsourcing was happening at all, and that it frequently involved considerable exploitation, became popularised through media coverage of the global justice movement, and through Naomi Klein's book *No Logo* (Klein, 2000), which connected the relatively concealed nature of this exploitation to shifts within marketing from conventional advertising to a more sophisticated and diffuse set of branding techniques. It is to a significant degree through this widespread popular knowledge that American Apparel and other ethical trade organizations have been able to build both a market and a brand identity. In marketing itself as 'sweatshop-free', American Apparel can in one sense be understood as both engaging with popular knowledge of the problems of post-Fordism and as offering itself up as a partial solution to its problems.

It is worth noting that the presentation of ethical consumption in which American Apparel participates has itself been the object of criticism in the past. Attention has been paid, for example, to the ways in which the advertising for such products has drawn upon quasi-imperialist modes of representation, featuring images of happy, smiling 'natives' whom Western consumers are invited to patronise and help. Here, the promotion of the Body Shop's 'community trade' initiative is the arch example; Vron Ware has highlighted the 'missionary discourse' at work in which white women, and in this case a white woman, in the form of Body Shop founder Anita Roddick, was figured as saviour, providing 'a feminist green capitalism' which exoticised its 'natives' whilst avoiding 'any kind of explanation for the way that the world has been degraded, environmentally, politically, [or] economically' (Ware 1992, pp. 243-248; see also Kaplan 1999). The symbolic effect of such ethical consumption initiatives, so it is argued, has often been to re-entrench imperialist structures of dependence and racist modes of representation, and to naturalise the idea that inhabitants of Western nations have no responsibility for global inequalities other than as benevolent consumer-patrons.

Part of what makes American Apparel interesting is how it simultaneously breaks with this tradition and it re-inscribes it. Since it does not primarily seek to help producers in the so-called third world, but rather those within the so-called *first*, it is able to escape at least some of the charges of being structured around a missionary or imperialist sense of benevolence to distant others. Whilst many of the workers it seeks to ‘help’ are from minority groups within the US, or migrant workers from Mexico and other parts of Latin America, it does attempt to draw attention to a broader social context of exploitation within the American, and specifically the Californian, garment industry. And whilst it’s not the only ethical trading organisation to market clothing which has been produced using ‘fair’ systems of labour within the ‘developed’ world – as organisations like *No Sweat* have been doing this for some time – it is a company that makes a great deal of visual and verbal noise about doing so, and which, amongst such organizations, has enjoyed the highest degree of mainstream commercial success (Ross 2004, pp. 1-4; Dean 2005, p. 124).¹ Indeed, the fact that its products are produced in the ‘first world’, that they are ‘Made in America’, is a key aspect of its promotional focus: its employees are widely used in the company’s publicity material, particularly its print advertising and billboards, but also in web-based ‘testimonials’, and the narratives presented to journalists.

The use of these ‘first-world’ employees can be understood in more detail by relating them to Manuel Castells’ concept of ‘fourth worlds’. ‘Fourth worlds’, for Castells, are the ‘zones of poverty and exclusion’ that have emerged during post-Fordism alongside downsizing and outsourcing, alongside the expansion of new technologies and the decline of social democracy. As he puts it

...the First World has *not* become the all-embracing universe of neo-liberal mythology. Because a new world, the Fourth World, has emerged, made up of multiple black holes of social exclusion throughout the planet. The Fourth World comprises large areas of the globe, such as much of Sub-Saharan Africa, and impoverished rural areas of Latin America and Asia. But it is also present in literally every country, and every city, in this new geography of social exclusion. It is formed of American inner city ghettos, Spanish enclaves of mass youth

unemployment, French banlieues warehousing North Africans, Japanese Yoseba quarters, and Asian mega-cities and shanty towns. [...] They are the majority in some areas, the minority in others, and a tiny minority in a few privileged contexts. But, everywhere, they are growing in number, and increasing in visibility, as the selective triage of informational capitalism, and the political breakdown of the welfare state, intensify social exclusion. In the current historical context, the rise of the Fourth World is inseparable from the rise of informational, global capitalism. (Castells 1998, pp. 164-5)

Clearly, American Apparel operates in relation to this ‘fourth world’ within the ‘first’ as much as it does to the so-called ‘third world’. The company frequently rationalises itself as offering jobs to workers who would otherwise have none, who would be excluded from the legal US economy and condemned to work in sweatshops. By wrapping a promotional message around its American employees and its ‘sweatshop-free’ status, American Apparel can itself be understood as both engaging with popular knowledge of some of the problems of post-Fordism and ‘fourth worlds’ and as offering itself up as a partial solution to these problems. However, this solution itself raises new sets of ethical and analytical questions, key amongst which is: to what extent does American Apparel *re-entrench* the division between fourth and first worlds, and to what extent does it engage with both in order to *lessen* the divisions?

This article explores this question by focusing on American Apparel’s emergence in a reflexive marketplace (Callon 1998, 2004). To be clear, what makes this company interesting, and why we choose to focus on it, is because its selective engagement with ‘ethical concerns’ illustrates broader emergent trends, even whilst it is by no means representative of all such initiatives in this area. We begin by analysing how American Apparel’s promotional strategy attempts to act as a ‘transparency effect’ and deploys a series of material, symbolic and visual props to create an effect of openness and transparency. This transparency effect purports to invert the ‘sweatshop’ mode of production by rendering visible aspects of production usually kept out of view. We examine how American Apparel relates to the particular gendered, classed and racialised

connotations of sweatshops, whilst harnessing itself to a specifically national discourse about the ‘American way’ of hard work and rising up the meritocratic ladder of opportunity. Asking to what extent the company’s own production and branding strategies depart from the model it pits itself against, we note that the hyper-visibility of boss and workers involves its own particular reworking of the eroticization of ‘the sweatshop woman’. American Apparel’s particular ‘economy of qualities’, we argue, therefore constructs particular hierarchies whilst simultaneously building promotional capital out of the performance of destroying them. By situating the company’s use of ‘all-under-one-roof’ manufacturing in the context of recent mutations in post-Fordism, by examining how its reflexive promotional techniques attempt to create a form of community between workers and consumers, and by exploring the motif of ‘liberation’ through sexualized loose sportswear, we suggest that this cultural formation might be understood as a form of ‘hip neo-Fordism’ for an age of consumer anxiety.

The transparency effect

Although much of American Apparel’s promotional material centres on the claim that the company is ‘brand-free’, this is in fact true only to the limited extent that the brand name itself does not feature on the surface of the products. Indeed, we want to argue that American Apparel has a very strong and carefully constructed brand identity, which is thematically organised around the notion of ‘transparency’ and, as we shall suggest in later sections, informality, and which can in part be analysed by referring back to the concept of a ‘transparency effect’. This idea, introduced by the Birmingham CCCS Media Group (Hall *et al.* 1981, pp. 88-117; McRobbie 2005, pp. 9-38) to explain the naturalisation of specific ideological agendas through the social production of current affairs media content, refers to the way in which the impression of an objective, transparent media could be understood as the outcome of processes of encoding and decoding, processes which, importantly, were seen as perpetually unstable (or, to adapt a well-known phrase, ‘by no means guaranteed’). Here we use the term to explore the ways in which American Apparel makes use of both metaphorical and literal forms of ‘transparency’ as part of the development of its brand identity.

In the context of ethical trading, and certainly in the case of American Apparel, emphasising the transparency of the production process has become an important way for companies to distinguish themselves from their competitors by drawing attention to the opacity of their competitors' operations and the forms of exploitation they may conceal. One method of making an organization appear 'transparent' is to foreground actual employees and the terms and conditions of their employment. This renders the chain of production less invisible, a strategy that might be termed 'defetishisation' (see Cook 2006; Littler 2005). In broader terms, as a branding strategy, this connects to related trends emphasizing the 'traceability' of products (particularly foodstuffs, as commodity chains get longer) as well as to the more general use of notions of 'provenance' as a marketing tool. In the context of ethical consumption, these strategies have been taken to a new level by American Apparel, which markets itself as a 'community' of workers and consumers, and which makes use of its employees as an important, and highly visible, part of the brand. On the company's website, for example, there is a section entitled 'Meet The Workers', featuring short profiles of employees. One of these is Angela Cruz, who works in the Inspection Department, and is quoted as saying 'This company is much better than where I used to work; it was another factory but they treated us really badly and we had no benefits'.ⁱⁱ Other forms of promotional material - including billboards and print advertisements - regularly feature the company's workers, providing snippets of information about their interests and backgrounds and featuring photographs of them in 'everyday' contexts and poses.

This extreme visibility of those involved in the production and retail of American Apparel's products raises a number of ethical questions which we shall explore in more detail below. In terms of American Apparel's promotional strategies, however, it is worth noting that this apparent transparency of the production process works as a hook upon which other aspects of the brand's identity have been built. Given that relatively good wages and conditions of employment are one of American Apparel's major selling points, it is perhaps unsurprising to find these emphasised in its promotional material. However, as with Hall et al.'s original formulation of a 'transparency effect', the image of transparency created by American Apparel is the outcome of a very specific form of

encoding and, we want to suggest, extends well beyond the simple provision of information into the construction of an elaborate brand identity supported by a number of visual and material cues. These include the large glass panels at the front of the stores, the ‘amateur’ photography on its walls, the see-through plastic bags in which customers carry their clothes, the black and white lettering of the logo, as well as its unfussy *sans serif* font. The labels inside the clothes are similarly simple, and the clothes themselves very rarely include any kind of pattern, relying instead on plain, if bold, blocks of colour. The walls of the store are white-washed and clothes are displayed on long free-standing clothes rails and Ikea-style white shelving. These design features give the impression that one is not in a shop so much as a warehouse or art gallery, which in turn creates the sense of a comparatively unmediated encounter with the product. This minimal and apparently ‘functional’ design style is not only the outcome of considerable planning, but is also inseparable from a particular class-based taste formation which, it is assumed, will be shared by target consumers. Here, then, the ‘informational’ functions of transparency become blurred with its ‘emotional’ or ‘aesthetic’ ones (Manzini 1989, p.165).

By encoding an aesthetic of transparency in these ways, the brand appears to offer itself up to an unprecedented level of consumer scrutiny, although in fact what is available for scrutiny, and what remains hidden, is very highly controlled.ⁱⁱⁱ If such strategies appear to be working well, however – and the rapid expansion of American Apparel stores suggests this is so – it is because the appeal to consumer anxiety about exploitation in the garment industry is so carefully intertwined with an appeal to target consumers’ *aesthetic* tastes and preferences. The company relies both on the ability of consumers to make implicit or explicit comparisons between American Apparel and its competitors, and on their ability to decode various design features (such as clear plastic bags, white shelving and free-standing clothes rails) as simultaneously aesthetically pleasing and as indicative of a general ethic of clarity and openness. In this way, consumer knowledge of exploitative economic relations is connected to the aesthetic qualities and associated taste judgments in which such knowledge is frequently encoded. The ‘brand-free’ tag is a case in point here. Although American Apparel has a strong brand identity, its claim to be brand-free rests on the likelihood that consumers will identify the very idea of brand names with

exploitative production processes. While the claim to be brand-free cannot be substantiated at any practical level, it gets realized in design terms through the absence of the American Apparel logo from the surface of any of its products. Thus a design feature that is essentially about taste (obvious logos are not ‘classy’) can be read as a moral virtue because of an already-existing pool of consumer knowledge that equates the brand names on competitors’ clothing (Nike, Gap) with sweatshops.

If branding is, as Celia Lury suggests, ‘the forging of links of image and perception between a range of products’ (Lury 1993, p. 87), then images produced *by* the company for the purposes of creating ‘added value’ may be turned into consumer perceptions *of* the company through the work of design. Unlike conventional advertising, this design work is not something one simply encounters as spectacle, but rather something that engages the human sensorium more fully, an aesthetic experience that integrates an overarching discourse and set of ideas into specific material forms (see Moor, forthcoming, 2007). These design features (which include the fabric used in the clothes, the architecture of the stores, the web site and its associated images and video footage, and both the form and content of the textual materials provided in stores) then become the means through which a series of values and associations are accessed. We have argued in this section that the most important of these is the idea of ‘transparency’ and that this ‘transparency effect’ in turn relates most obviously to the alleged transparency of relations of production and their asserted distance from conventional labour relations in the garment industry. In this way, then, American Apparel’s additional claim to be ‘sweatshop-free’ as well as ‘brand-free’ relies not only on a generalized consumer anxiety, but also on a set of specific associations with the idea of the ‘sweatshop’. It is therefore to the historical significance of the sweatshop, and its relationship to American national and imperial projects, to which we now turn.

The sweatshop in American history

Part of the power of American Apparel’s anti-sweatshop discourse is that it does not only speak to the contemporary context, but also evokes a longer historical debate about the relationship between *global* flows of capital and people, and *national* cultures and

identities. It is important to note that sweatshops have always been associated with ‘foreigners’, whether those ‘out there’ in other parts of the world, or those arriving ‘here’ as migrants. More specifically, the term has always reflected social anxiety about global flows and exchanges of people, goods, culture and capital. As Bender and Greenwald (2003) point out, ‘where the sweatshop is cast in the beginning of the twenty-first century as the worst expression of the new unregulated, global economy, it was understood at the beginning of the twentieth century as the dangerous outgrowth of unrestricted immigration and urbanization’ (ibid, p. 2).

The labour of immigrant women was described as ‘sweated’ as early as the 1830s and the term ‘sweatshop’ itself emerged in the 1890s (Bender and Greenwald 2003, p. 2). One of the successes of the labour movement at this time was, as Daniel Walkowitz (2003) points out, to establish the term ‘sweatshop’ as providing ‘*prima facie* evidence of managerial abuse’ (p. xi) and to imbue it with a moral weight that allowed it to work as an almost universally accepted claim for justice. Similarly, Andrew Ross notes that ‘the repugnance attached to the term ‘sweatshop’ commands a moral power, second only to slavery itself, to rouse public opinion into a collective spasm of abhorrence’ (Ross 2003, p. 228). Whilst, almost since its inception, the term sweatshop has had the capacity to drive reformist efforts, what is notable is that the sweatshop was rarely seen as *exemplary* of capitalist practice, but rather as a pathological and aberrant form of capitalism ‘gone bad’. Reform campaigners rarely advocated a fundamental restructuring of the capitalist wage system because sweatshops could be consigned to the realm of ‘bad capitalism’ – there was, at root, a belief that sweatshops could be eradicated while leaving the broader economic structure intact (Walkowitz 2003, p. xi). Such a belief persists today, and is evidenced by the fact that so many anti-sweatshop activists do not consider themselves to be particularly ‘radical’, and say that their motivation for getting involved as activists is that sweatshops are an aberration in a system that otherwise works well (Featherstone 2003, p. 260).

However, the consignment of the sweatshop to the realm of ‘bad capitalism’ was itself facilitated historically by the fact that sweatshops were (and, we would argue, continue to

be) so easily associated with immigrants, and specifically with a ‘foreign method of working’ (Bender 2003) that was opposed to, rather than continuous with, the American ‘factory system’, considered a model of efficiency and civilization. A ‘racialization of the economics of the garment industry’ (Bender 2003, p. 20) was already in place quite early in the history of the sweatshop, and the US Industrial Commission of 1901 set out explicitly to define the sweatshop in terms of the links between ‘industrial disorder and the peculiar character of the nation’s new immigrants’ (Bender and Greenwald 2003, p. 3). Members of the Commission and its expert witnesses found that immigrants – particularly Eastern European Jews, but also Italians – were distinct ‘races’ who were vastly inferior, physically and morally, to American ‘stock’ (ibid, p. 3) and that their arrival ‘threatened the racial purity of the nation, not only because of their higher birthrate, but also because they carried with them and bred the germs of contagious disease in their cramped neighborhoods and filthy tenements... [and] *imported degraded ways of working* that seemed antithetical to an American factory imagined as clean, scientific, and orderly’ (ibid, p. 3, our italics).

‘Race’, then, was used from the start to explain the economics of the sweatshop, but the language of contagion and racial degeneration also linked this racialization to a gendered discourse which in turn has provided an additional incentive for efforts to reform the sweatshop. Thus where workers and unionists tended to repudiate and challenge the racialized language of the reformers, they often found common currency with the reformers in identifying the specifically *gendered* dangers of this type of work. Women and children were seen as the most poignant ‘victims’, but it was the particular question of women’s reproductive capacities and their present and future roles as wives and mothers that most concerned reformers (Hapke 2004). For outside critics, the ‘immoral’ mixing of men and women in the workplace would lead to racial degeneration (Bender 2003, p. 28) and the alleged ‘promiscuity’ of the sweatshop was cited by both inspectors and journalists as one of the ways in which the already ‘degraded’ character of immigrants could become fixed and then reproduced (ibid, p. 29). For those inside the sweatshop it was the threat posed by women’s work to the sexual division of labour that was of greatest concern, and it was perhaps unsurprising that this was a particular worry

for recently arrived immigrants, who identified the concept of the male breadwinner as an American ideal, and therefore as central to their own Americanization.

The role of gender in shaping early anti-sweatshop discourses does not, however, end with this uneasy alliance around the issue of the perils of women's work, and the often highly paternalistic campaigns to which it led. As Laura Hapke points out, for all that discussions of the sweatshop emphasized its unceasing, mechanized toil for political ends, these discussions also tended to take on a seductive quality (Hapke 2004, p. 32), and the arrival of the ethnic 'sweatshop woman' allowed an already-existing tradition of seamstress stories to take on a more obviously racialized dimension, in which the working woman's very 'dirt' and sweat becomes eroticized (Hapke 2004, p. 32). Here, as with the question of women's work more generally, women were positioned as both victims and symbols of degeneration; as Hapke puts it, they become 'the sweatshop innocent who succumbs, or else... the suspect ethnic who is variously pleasure-loving, misbehaving, or tragically harassed' (ibid.). As we shall see in the following sections, American Apparel's attempt to challenge the exploitative conditions of the Californian garment industry is by no means immune from the historical appeal of rescuing the 'sweatshop innocent' from a 'foreign method of working', nor from the eroticization of the predominantly female workers it employs.

The sweatshop and American national identity

In what ways, then, does American Apparel invoke and make use of a history of thinking about, and organizing against, the sweatshop? The marketing of the company as both 'sweatshop-free' and 'brand-free' trades on consumer knowledge of, and antipathy towards, not so much brands *per se* (although this does in fact serve to buttress a moral position with an appeal to taste) but rather the sweatshop labour that has been linked by some activists, and by authors such as Naomi Klein, to a range of high-profile garment companies. In this context, if American Apparel is, as Andrew Ross puts it, a 'wager that socially conscious merchandising can add market value to a corporate product' (2004, p. 5), it is also one that depends upon a fairly educated and knowledgeable market.

Furthermore, the consumer knowledge on which such a wager rests is not limited to these

more recent interventions, but also incorporates a longer history of ways of representing, and organizing against, the sweatshop in American culture. The enduring historical legacy of these early sweatshop reform campaigns can be seen in particular in the way that American Apparel foregrounds *national* questions (for example in its name) about the status of immigrants and their relationship to American capitalist citizenship.

In many of his public relations activities, the CEO of American Apparel, Dov Charney, has been keen to draw attention to the fact that ‘sweatshop’ labour is, and has historically been, central to the US and particularly the Californian economy. The premise of his own company is that this need not necessarily be so, and that it is perfectly possible to run a profitable business without ‘sweatshop’ levels of human exploitation. Such statements are in many ways quite bold, given the fairly widely held belief that sweatshops are ‘foreign’ and exist ‘out there’ in other non-Western parts of the world, rather than in America itself. Nonetheless, in positioning American Apparel as a ‘sweatshop-free’ *national* brand, Charney is able to capitalize on a deeply-held belief that sweatshops are, in essence, if not always in practice, antithetical to the ‘American way’, and to key into patriotic sentiments that themselves derive much of their potency from ideas about America, and the American economy, as ‘civilized’ and ‘developed’ in contrast to the brutal and uncivilized ‘foreign methods of working’ found elsewhere. As Andrew Ross puts it, ‘for some, the public will to eliminate sweatshops from the labor landscape can designate a significant level of moral development on the part of a national community’ (Ross 2003, p. 228) and may form part of what he calls the ‘claim to moral superiority on the part of developed nations’ (ibid.). It is important to remember that such ideas were equally prevalent during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century when, according to Laura Hapke, escaping or abolishing the sweatshop became something like an ‘industrial sublime’ (Hapke 2004, p. 11). From this point onwards reformist attempts to purge the nation of sweatshops – no matter how well intentioned – have often been entwined with national and capitalist imperatives to prove that capitalism itself is not antithetical to, but part of, the moral and civilizational development of the nation.

American Apparel also draws on a long history of specifically American (anti-) sweatshop discourse in the way that it makes use of a narrative of upward mobility. One of the classic ways of representing the sweatshop – at least from the managerial viewpoint – has been to see it as a relatively transitory phase in immigrants’ upward mobility: as part of the journey towards becoming an assimilated American. Although Charney would be careful to distance himself from early sweatshop apologists, he nonetheless subscribes to the conventional management position that low-wage manufacturing and garment work can be a ‘first step on the ladder’ for immigrants aspiring towards the American Dream.

Within this patriotic version of American meritocracy there are, however, some qualifications. As Hapke points out, debates about sweatshops have always been inextricable from a ‘nativist tide that ebbs and flows’, and responses to sweatshops – whether reformist or apologist – have often depended a great deal on the supposed potential ‘American-ness’ of immigrants. Similarly, early investigations into the link between sweatshops and the ‘peculiar character’ of new immigrants found that certain types of immigrants – who were positioned as constituting distinct ‘races’ – were constitutionally predisposed to sweatshop work, and that further distinctions could be drawn *within* these ‘races’ between ‘industrial’ and ‘parasitic’ classes of immigrants (Bender 2003). While such crude biological and evolutionist paradigms are no longer a feature of either pro- or anti-sweatshop discourse, American Apparel’s ostensibly ‘pro’-immigrants’ rights position cannot help but become embroiled in wider debates about the position of different minorities within American national culture, and their relation to normative American-ness. In one of Charney’s early interviews he contrasts his own eager and hardworking (Latino/a) employees with the ‘welfare recipients’ that they subsidise through their taxes. The figure of the ‘welfare recipient’ is, as bell hooks (2000) has pointed out, usually coded as black, and such pronouncements are part of a long history of dividing and classifying different classes of immigrants and minorities. They are also fundamentally conservative in the context of a political conjuncture in which George Bush tries to woo Latino voters as a ‘model minority’, and in which Mexican president Vicente Fox can argue that ‘dignified’ Mexicans are doing work in the US that

‘not even black people want to do’ (cited in Tuckman 2005). In this situation, a ‘pro’-immigrant stance may depend, implicitly or explicitly, on the forcing of divisions between one marginalized group and another, and again, such representational strategies are highly conventional in the way that they rely upon an assumption that some minorities are hard-working and should be given a chance, whereas others are fundamentally lazy and should not be subsidized.

In fact, Charney’s largely Latino/a workforce has been made central to the brand’s identity in a number of ways, and here we might note one specific way in which workers are used, as authentic emblems of the ‘place’ of American Apparel. Assessing the reasons for the large number of clothing manufacturers based in Los Angeles, Bonanich and Applebaum (2003) suggest that it is not only the easy availability of cheap (i.e. immigrant) labour and the well-developed regional infrastructure that explains its value to the garment industry, but additionally the global cultural significance of the region, which ensures a ready-made market for its cultural products. They argue that ‘the mystique of the location of origin adds to the value of the goods, which assume in the popular imagination the reputation of the place and its characteristics. The words ‘California’ and Los Angeles conjure up images of sun and surf, of people who are wealthy and glamorous...Cultural-products industries both benefit from these images and help to create and maintain them’ (Bonanich and Applebaum 2004, pp.157-58).^{iv} What we are arguing here, however, is that this easy availability of migrant workers is in this case *part of* the ‘mystique’ of the area; its proximity to the Mexican border, and its historically multiracial quality are, for this target market anyway, perhaps equally important as images of sun and surf.

Similar points have been made by other authors about the value of ‘life-enhancing’ marginal populations to city-based creative economies composed largely of white professionals (see Yúdice 2003; Castells 2000). A number of political questions flow from this, some of the most concrete arising in relation to the issue of the legal status of American Apparel’s workers. Charney has admitted, in early interviews, that many of his workers may be ‘illegal’ or undocumented, and that Californian law provides the

loophole that makes this possible. He has also expressed support for a policy proposal floated by George Bush, prior to the 2004 Presidential elections, as part of the Republican pursuit of Latino voters, to grant currently undocumented workers temporary work permits, or ‘guest worker’ passes. This is part of Charney’s positioning of himself as ‘on the side’ of immigrants, a position also promoted on the website, where there are pictures of American Apparel workers attending immigrants’ rights rallies. This approach is not without its problems, however, most notably in the way that it exposes migrant populations to a much higher degree of state surveillance. As one American Apparel worker has pointed out, many migrant workers would be very reluctant to volunteer for such schemes, since they may have already lived in the States for several years, and what Bush’s plans will do, in effect, is place a new time limit upon their stay – they will be granted temporary legitimacy, but only at the cost of possibly being forced to return at a later stage. At this point Charney’s support for Bush’s scheme begins to look very expedient indeed, and the lack of symmetry between his own interests and those of his workers becomes clear; he can derive a particular kind of competitive advantage from employing Latino/a workers at a fair wage, and from being seen to support a scheme to enhance their basic rights, but he does not actually *need* his workers to be permanent or settled. American Apparel has been set up in such a way that it can derive (brand) value from its Los Angeles location and fairly-paid Latino/a workforce regardless of their *actual* legal and economic status or domestic circumstances.

Sex and the CEO

American Apparel, therefore, derives brand value from its Los Angeles workforce, and here we want to consider its use of its employees in its promotional complex in more detail, for this also, as we will see, allows us to consider how there might also be threads of continuity with the strategies of sexploitation so redolent of early sweatshops. As we mentioned earlier, images of - as well as discussion about - the workers have been a conspicuous element of American Apparel’s promotional strategies. In the broader context of the stores, website and advertising, it becomes clear that these images of employees are used to suggest that American Apparel operates as a form of *community* of workers and consumers, connected through aesthetics as much as ideals (the displays of

artwork, magazines and invitations to participate in photography projects appear in-store and on the website).

The use of employees includes the CEO Dov Charney himself, who has featured in several adverts, including the grainy, amateur-style photo that graced the back of London's listings magazine *Time Out* in September 2004 in an advert for Britain's first branch. The idea of a fun, post-Fordist community ethos has been generated through media articles about the company, which are often wrapped even more graphically around Charney's persona. These invariably describe how the organisation has masseurs on tap, an approachable CEO who gives everyone his mobile phone number, and the relaxed, party-like atmosphere of the place (ABC News 2005). American Apparel has generated a range of publicity around its CEO, including several TV features showing a very casual Dov running through the company giving high-fives to his worker-friends. In other words, the company marks a partial return to 'Fordist' modes of production, in that they aim to manufacture everything under one roof, but it also incorporates the informality, and what management textbooks love to call 'bottom-up empowerment', cherished by those higher up the working ladder in the creative industries (du Gay and Pryke 2002; Hoopes 2003; Rose 1999). Every day at American Apparel, we are encouraged to believe, is a dress-down Friday. Yet at the same time, this is not a co-operative; people earn markedly different salaries from each other, and the attempt at setting up a union was quashed, earning it the opprobrium of some alternative globalisation activists and an ongoing debate in activist-oriented communities as to its ethical credentials.^v

The 2004 *Time Out* ad, which features a photo of Charney from the back - naked save for an American Apparel t-shirt - also indicates how one of the companies promotional 'bottom lines' has been the use of a certain kind of sexualisation, and of the extraction of somewhat sensational tabloidesque elements for its middle-class target market. 'This September' the ad proposes, 'Come see what we're doing at our community store and gallery' (*Time Out* 2004). Clearly, American Apparel wants to be seen as doing *more* than paying decent wages. Offering a very literal twist on the 'teaser' advert, which

enigmatically hints at what is to come, this is an advert which is clearly trying to tell us that this brand and company is having a good time, that it's flamboyantly informal, fun, irreverent and *cheeky*. It is part of a wider campaign: others in its series include images of Charney lying languidly in bed with a woman and a range of female employees in provocatively 'everyday' poses. The adverts themselves follow a feature in the July 2004 issue of the American women's magazine *Jane*, in which the journalist Claudine Ko described how Charney masturbated in front of her during the interview (Ko 2004 pp. 136-141). This scene tended to be mentioned in most of Charney's subsequent media interviews, as such salacious stories, which clearly draw on tabloid conventions, make the 'respectable' figure of the CEO newsworthy (Littler 2006). Through such strategies, American Apparel's brand has been marketed as irreverent and sexual as well as 'fair', which also acts to circumvent accusations of dull, square 'worthiness'. The insistently amateur imagery of the advertising's photography - a typical hallmark of a sophisticated communications strategy addressed to an audience rich in cultural capital - adds to this effect by generating unthreatening forms of intimacy with its audience.

Charney's tendency to promote himself as a streetwise hustler is clearly meant to appear to be layered with a heavy dose of irony. Yet at the same time such imagery means that awkward questions resurface about exploitation that the irony is in part an attempt to fend off. For instance, it is notable that the majority of the employees featured in the adverts are female. Such imagery, on the one hand, is clearly meant to promote a sexually liberated, insistently cosmopolitan, and relatively diverse image of its young workers. On these grounds, of its diverse imagery of 'everyday' women, American Apparel has been praised by some feminists and has been used by the US feminist magazines *Bitch* and *Ms* to produce their t-shirts.^{vi} Charney's habit of gaining publicity by discussing his sexual relationships with some of his workers usually emphasise how he is enslaved to his sexuality; they portray him as being in the thrall of 'strong' women. In other words, there is an attempt to show that he is exposing *himself* as well as his employees. Yet on another level, the knowledge of the power relations within the company - which, no matter how much post-Fordist informality there is, remains a hierarchy - in which the female employees are in an inferior position to the male boss, can undercut the irony and render

the playboy image embarrassingly unironic. Clearly, Charney is in control of his 'self-exposure' in a way that his workers, particularly those on the factory floor (such as Angela Cruz from the Inspection Department) are not.

The use of images of American Apparel's female employees as 'empowered' through their sexuality therefore occupies an interesting place, both in terms of debates about the company's commitment to abolishing exploitation and within the matrix of contemporary popular culture more generally. American Apparel's posters and billboards have featured a number of young and dishevelled employees, sometimes with a tagline introducing them by name ('Meet Shannon' and 'Meet Spring') next to a small amount of information about their interests, their background – which, importantly, is persistently ethnically marked - and their place of work ('of Chinese and Croatian descent, Shannon hails from Windsor, Canada'; 'born in La Paz, Mexico [...] Spring works as a retail manager at American Apparel').^{vii} The echoes of the porn/sex industry that are evoked here are amplified in other ways: some of the stores, for example, are decorated with 1970s covers of *Hustler* and *Playboy*; the opening of their branch in Shoreditch, London in 2005 included a performance by two female pole dancers; and one of their 2005 ad campaigns featured the 'all-American' porn star, Lauren Phoenix. Running in tandem with these actions are related stories circulated through journalism: such as the anecdote that originally, American Apparel t-shirts were tested for size and fit on the employees of in lapdancing clubs (Gladwell 2000).

The argument over whether this soft porn-related discourse can be understood as an 'empowering', irrepressibly modern manifestation of female sexuality, or an old-fashioned form of exploitation in groovy new clothing, is fairly active in journalistic commentary and a variety of website and blogspots, and the level of discussion has ratcheted up further since Dov Charney had three lawsuits filed against him for sexual harassment in 2005.^{viii} The imagery used by American Apparel needs to be understood in the context of broader scopic regimes of sexualisation. For instance, its use of softcore porn motifs marks its insertion into the wider popular aesthetic that Ariel Levy has called 'raunch culture' (Levy 2005). This term is used by Levy to describe the 'pornoisation' of

young girls' or women's popular culture, in which practices such as wearing Playboy t-shirts and taking up pole-dancing are coded as female emancipation, which Levy argues are merely a form of retrosexism (encouraging the performance of sexual availability whilst simultaneously encouraging women to become distanced from 'real' sexual pleasure). The terms of this debate about the power relations of such popular forms of 'pornoisation' are complex, as they to some extent reproduce the terms of a whole skein of academic debates around the various uses of porn. Both what Levy terms 'raunch culture' and American Apparel's use of it, for example, might be read as not necessarily being offensive to women who do not feel 'hostility to the concept of visual imagery designed for sexual stimulation', just as pro-porn feminists famously pointed out that it is not sexualised imagery *per se* that is problematic (McRobbie 2005, p. 72; Church Gibson 2004). As Lynne Segal (drawing on Wendy Brown) put it, 'the theory of gender in anti-pornography feminism often "mirrors the straight male pornography it means to criticise"' (Segal 2004, p. 59, p. 66).

In addition, however, there are some specific and crucial points to make here. First, American Apparel clearly *plays* on this controversy to add marketing potential to its product, as the soft connotations of sexual explicitness clearly provide the brand with added marketing value, notoriety and coverage. Second, we might also point out that its use of sexual imagery is part of its emphasis on *casual* nature of the clothing, a *relaxed* attitude which can be related to the appeal of wider discursive shifts in post-Fordism that Sam Binkley, drawing on Foucault, has termed 'loosening the self' (Binkley 2006). Third – and of crucial importance here, as with the earlier porn debates - is that what is at stake therefore becomes a question of the newly-inscribed *power relations* of these gendered sexualities in play.

In this respect, American Apparel's advertising is interesting, as it both gestures towards female sexual emancipation whilst at the same time re-inscribing their status as workers within a traditionally patriarchal system. The women can look confident and non-glossy; they also participate in a long tradition of objectification and are subservient to a male boss. In this sense, American Apparel's gendered promotion captures something of what

Angela McRobbie has described, drawing on Judith Butler's work, as the 'doing and undoing of gender' in postfeminism. McRobbie writes of how:

popular culture continues to define and redefine the boundaries of gender, showing how much is at stake in the marshalling of gender identities in terms of rigid difference even as those very differences are now also being undermined, so that the field of popular culture now comprises a to and fro movement between the doing and undoing of gender (McRobbie 2005, p. 71)

American Apparel's 'doing and undoing of gender' through its sexualised branding strategy works alongside its 'transparency effect'. The images of women it uses on the website gallery, magazine advertising and billboards show women with shiny skin, with visible pores, with the occasional spot, with a little bit of cellulite. These images attempt to 'undo' the image of the hyperglossy, unattainable, superfeminised, airbrushed clotheshorse. They attempt to 'undo' the long hours of work that are required to be put into more manicured versions of femininity. By showing women 'playing around', *conscious* of the camera, they also, to an extent, seem to be suggesting that they are attempting to 'undo' images of sexual powerlessness and to perform a femininity of sexual openness. The *ad hoc* feel of the documentary-style footage, with photographs that have the look of being captured by mobile phone or disposable cameras - aptly described by journalist Dan Glaister as 'polaroid softcore in homage to Larry Clark and Nan Goldin' - augments these characteristics (Glaister 2006). This 'doing and undoing of gender' also extends to the aesthetic of American Apparel's clothes, as their unfussy lines attempt to 'undo', to some extent, hyperfeminised versions of femininity. They are relaxed, not fitted, and fall along the axis Toby Miller has termed 'sportsex' (Miller 2001). One conspicuous item of its clothing line, for example, has been its 'boy brief' for girls, a pair of low-slung Y-Fronts produced in a range of bright colours to fit women.^{ix} The quasi-transgressively feminine imagery of the clothing is also, then, an example of how American Apparel gestures towards the undoing of hyper-feminised modes of self-presentation and lightly flirts with a femme/butch aesthetic, both opening out and reinscribing what Butler terms 'the heterosexual matrix'.

Clearly, though, at the same time American Apparel's promotional complex serves to 'redo' some very conventional and tediously patriarchal dynamics. At its most basic, there is the blunt fact that despite the stores selling men's clothes, the images are overwhelmingly of *women*. This, combined with how these women remain limited to specific types – young, relatively slim, femme – works to cast its porn references in a profoundly conservative light. That these sexualised and gendered dynamics of the promotional workplace function through a profound imbalance in power relations is, moreover, augmented by how the CEO constantly talks in interviews about his sexual relations with his female employees.

Of equal importance to these gendered, racialised and sexualized power dynamics is that it is noticeable that workers who appear in the ads predominantly tend to be salespeople. It is not often that images of employees doing factory work feature in the advertising, although they do, as we mentioned before, feature on the website, which is crammed with all kinds of promotional information about the company. In other words, what is also notable is that there is a *hierarchy of visibility* to the promotional process which 'defetishises' the workers. The 'transparency' through which the workers are presented is accompanied by a set of value-laden constructions. The largely Latina manufacturing employees are predominantly used to illustrate the 'sweatshop-free' part of the brand image, whilst the younger group of salespeople, whose cosmopolitanism, range of nationalities and 'ethnic' diversity' is strongly flagged up by the advertising (and yet who are still predominantly white or light-skinned) are used to illustrate its 'laid-back' and sexually liberated brand identity. In the attempt to demonstrate the erosion of hierarchies, then, there is a simultaneous creation of them. Creating an image of a white boss and his harem of sexually powerful cosmopolitan workers has some distinctly old-fashioned – and yet simultaneously only too contemporary - echoes of imperialist exploitation. In this context, one very legitimate question to ask is: to what extent is this a re-ordering of the imperialist imagery of workers in 'older' fair trade advertising, with the role of exoticised native workers of the third world now supplanted by newly exoticised images of female workers from the first and fourth?

Hip neo-fordism

We can explore some of the reasons for, and ramifications of, these hierarchies from a somewhat different perspective by returning to the discussion back to the company's relationship to post-Fordism. American Apparel is, as we have seen, symptomatic of the post-Fordist organisation in that it presents an image of a relaxed working environment in which the fun and pleasure of leisure is imported into the eight-hour working day. Yet like many such industries, the image of worker empowerment co-exists with a profoundly hierarchical structure. In an industry which is notorious for horizontal outsourcing, it seeks to bring back vertical integration and to do 'everything under one roof', which, in its publicity materials, is presented as a means of improving fairness and efficiency. Of course, post-Fordism did not entail the erosion of Fordist methods of production, as many commentators have pointed out (Murray 1990; Rustin 1989). We only need to look at Taylorist-style factories in China, burger flippers in Illinois, or the direct marketing telephonists in Aberdeen and Bangladesh, if we want to see Fordism alive and well inside post-Fordism.^x

But what is interesting here is how American Apparel offers a somewhat different configuration of these relations between Fordism and post-Fordism. Because, as we have seen, it markedly extends the concept of workplace informality and 'bottom-up empowerment', stereotypically associated with the environments of creative professionals in California, New York and Shoreditch into its vertically integrated Fordist factory. Interestingly, it is not only American Apparel which is returning to such methods, but also other organisations such as the clothing company Zara, which does not promote itself as an ethical organisation but does run its just-in-time production out of its all-under-one roof company in Spain. As the popular business writer, James Surowiecki puts it, in *The Wisdom of Crowds*, his recent corporate hymn to the individualistic profit to be gleaned from collectivity, medium-size companies like Zara have started to keep everything under one roof for maximum flexibility and control – not to contract out like Nike or H&M – whilst at the same time deploying that management conceit of the 1990s, worker empowerment, as the key to a healthy company (Surowiecki, 2004, pp. 192-200).

Such companies are post-Fordist in that they are consumer-driven, work through just-in-time production and emphasise informal environments, but they reduce their outsourcing and time costs by returning to Fordist modes of vertical integration on an in-house basis.

There is, clearly, then, a post-Fordist emphasis on the benefits of ‘collective’ cultural organisation driving this form of production. In addition, the reasons for this can also be located in relation to the ongoing fallout from Reaganite deregulation and the consequent rise in the power of retailers in relation to manufacturers. As Dana Frank has shown in her book *Buy American*, the clothing industry in America, and particularly LA, expanded after Reaganite deregulation meant that wages plummeted and the use of homeworking and sweatshops soared (Frank 1999, p. 150). To place this phenomenon in the broader context of retail in the US, Christine L Williams has recently pointed out how in the first half of the twentieth century, retail stores were ‘relatively powerless compared to the manufacturers’, but from the 1980s in particular, due primarily to the government’s deregulation of trade and the abolition of laws enabling manufacturers to set their own prices, ‘the relative power of retailers and manufacturers flipped’ (Williams 2006, p. 27). Retailers had the upper hand because they could discount manufacturer’s stock. Under these circumstances, Williams writes, ‘the only way for retailers to ensure profitability is to manufacture their own brands’, citing the Gap as a key example of such a ‘strategy of vertical integration’ (Williams 2006, p. 32).

We might say that American Apparel, therefore, in emerging out of this context, offers a form of hip neo-Fordism for the age of consumer anxiety. Its image of worker empowerment and togetherness functions to bolster the brand image, and therefore increase the profits, of a vertically hierarchical organisation as much as it does further the drive towards less exploitative working conditions. Its moral outrage towards the sweatshop extends as far as it can make a profit out of it. Like any organisation which professes to caring capitalism, it is full of contradictions. It pays above the minimum wage (on average, double, but at times slipping to only two dollars above it) but it is most definitely not a co-operative. It provides access to insurance, educational facilities and has working perks like on-site massage; but it does not encourage unions, and indeed

very notably has clamped down on attempts to set one up. It encourages the extension of immigrants' citizenship rights (for which it is very popular with many, if by no means all, people from the poorer Latino/a community in particular); yet it also uses and relies on people existing in such zones of exclusion and fourth worlds, as they remain a pool of relatively cheap labour.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that to tackle exploitation in the LA garment industry, three elements are needed together - massive union organising, mandated retailer and manufacturer responsibility, and public support (Nutter in Ross, 1997: 213). American Apparel contributes at a usefully high-profile level to the discourse against sweatshops/unfair labour conditions, and demonstrates manufacturer responsibility towards paying the minimum wage. In this respect it is valuable. Yet, as its anti-union stance demonstrates, it clearly also trades on anti-exploitation policies *not* being enforced throughout the industry, and in doing so mitigates against the *international* policies which have been increasingly pursued by clothing trade union the ILGWU since the 1990s (Frank 1999). Instead, it relies on a paternalistic form of 'caring capitalism', the gendered and 'raced' legacies of which are registered through the ambivalences within its promotional complex that we have discussed.

If, as Castells puts it, the 'third world' is slipping away, to be replaced by intense pockets of excluded poverty distributed more 'evenly around the globe' (which is effectively the pattern that the G8 neo-liberal package, offering debt cancellation plus privatisation to Africa, promotes) then we might expect to see more 'ethical' products that channel themselves towards the excluded zones of the fourth world which exist within the first (Monbiot 2005, p. 21). We might also expect to see a growth in such *selective* engagements with the idea of trading fairly. Our analysis suggests that it is therefore important to interrogate the meanings of specific constellations of ethical consumption. This is not merely to pursue a form of academic carping. At a time when the language of the left, of equality and emancipation, has been subject to co-optation and slippage

(Gilroy 2000, p. 21; Hall 2006) it is crucial to specify what we mean and where our allegiances lie; and this in itself involves questioning what exactly is being meant by 'ethical consumption' and 'trade justice' and the problems and possibilities of the types of investments we make, and relate to, in the area.

By employing workers from the 'fourth world', and making them a visible part of its promotional strategy, American Apparel attempts to demonstrate how it is *redressing* exploitation, but, as we have shown, it often simultaneously manages to *reinscribe* many of its key elements. A wide range of contemporary authors have persuasively described how the invisibility of sweated labour has remained crucial to the construction of the 'ethnic and gendered economies' of contemporary capitalism (see for example Mohanty 2003, p. 159). American Apparel similarly foregrounds such exploitation whilst seeking to gain capital from its revelations (what we might call 'fetishised de-fetishisation'). Run as a commercial company with vast wage discrepancies, in other words, American Apparel serves to reproduce the wealth gap between the first world (including Charney and his customers) and the fourth (including Angela Cruz and her colleagues), as much as it works to curb it the worst excesses of its poverty.

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ⁱ American Apparel opened its first retail store in 2003, had 57 by 2005, and plans on 1,000 worldwide by 2008 (Dean 2005, p. 124).

ⁱⁱ www.americanapparel.net. Accessed March 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is notoriously difficult, for example, to find information about the company's profits, and although salary details are bandied around frequently, it is hard to get firm numbers – not least because salaries at the lower end are not fixed but vary in line with productivity.

^{iv} iPods, for example, are now described as 'Designed by Apple in California' as well as 'Made in China'.

^v www.knowmore.com. Accessed March 2006.

^{vi} See <http://www.bitchmagazine.com> and <http://www.msmagazine.com/>.

vii Charney's alleged penchant for employing sexy ethnically diverse girls and simultaneously exploiting Latino/a employees is also mentioned in Ellenson 2005.

viii Interestingly, whilst denying these allegations, Charney extended the company's transparency effect to himself, whilst simultaneously emphasizing its constructed nature, by speaking of his own 'transparent persona': '[i]n my opinion their lawsuits are a false attempt to extort money from my company and exploit my transparent persona.' (Navarro 2005)

ix A pair was sported in the television drama series about profoundly glamorous LA-based lesbians, *The L Word*, by the show's first Latina character, Carmen de la Pica Morales - a character which, appropriately enough, was given a mixed reception from AfterEllen.com for being a late arrival (given the size of LA's Hispanic population) and for its clumsy reliance on stereotypes (Lo 2006). American Apparel's 'Classic Girl' line is also one of the tie-in brands to the TV series. <http://www.starbrand.tv/thelword/b05.asp>. Accessed April 2006.

x Michael Rustin wrote insightfully in 1989 of 'a corporate system which calculatedly deploys pre-Fordist, Fordist or post-Fordist strategies, whichever seems to its local advantage' (Rustin 1989, p. 69).