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Cottage Industry as Social Practice: Sustainability of Handweaving in the Post-Industrialist Era

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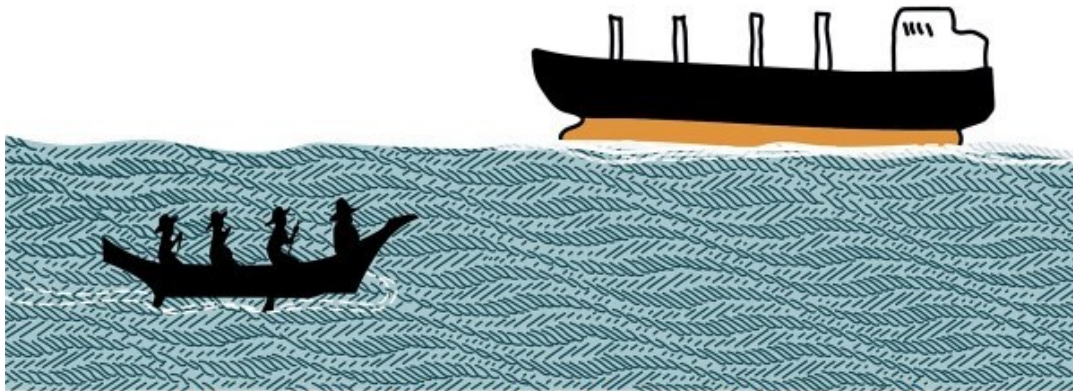
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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global



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Cottage Industry as Social Practice: Sustainability of Handweaving in the Post-Industrialist Era

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Economic historians are in agreement that the onset of the Industrial Revolution is the most important event in the history of humanity since the domestication of animals and plants.¹

As one immersed in the history of textile production and its evolution throughout the ages, this comment by the esteemed economist Diedre Mclosekey is particularly compelling. It identifies industrialization as a historical, economical, technological, and sociological event not just as a marker of time, but one that impacted humanity on a much grander scale. But what is not mentioned is the fact that the textile ushered in this significant socio-economic shift. Within the span of 286 years since the flying shuttle was patented by John Kay, most of our knowledge about materials and processes behind making cloth have been displaced with a dependency upon a much larger interconnected global system of production. It is safe to say that most of the population within post-industrial economies are no longer raising sheep, growing cotton or flax, or cultivating silk worms. Nor are they spinning, weaving, or sewing textiles for their own use. Instead, we have complacently accepted the advancements of technology, accepting both the good and the bad that come with it. I am not here to discuss nor mourn for the days of yore. I am a realist and understand that had I lived prior to industrialization, my life would have been much more challenging. There would be no time for analytical observations of how textiles embody our socio-political and cultural heritage because I would have been too busy producing enough clothing for my family, among other challenges. However, the transitional time period of early industrial textile production is truly mesmerizing. Some of this history is captured in a 1777 textile sample book from a Manchester manufacturing firm of Benjamin and John Bower.² The samples in this book depict cloth made from Sea Island cotton and silk. The Sea Island cotton was mostly likely cultivated by slaves in the twilight hours of the southern American colonies and then marketed as material to cloth sailors, artisans, and slaves.³

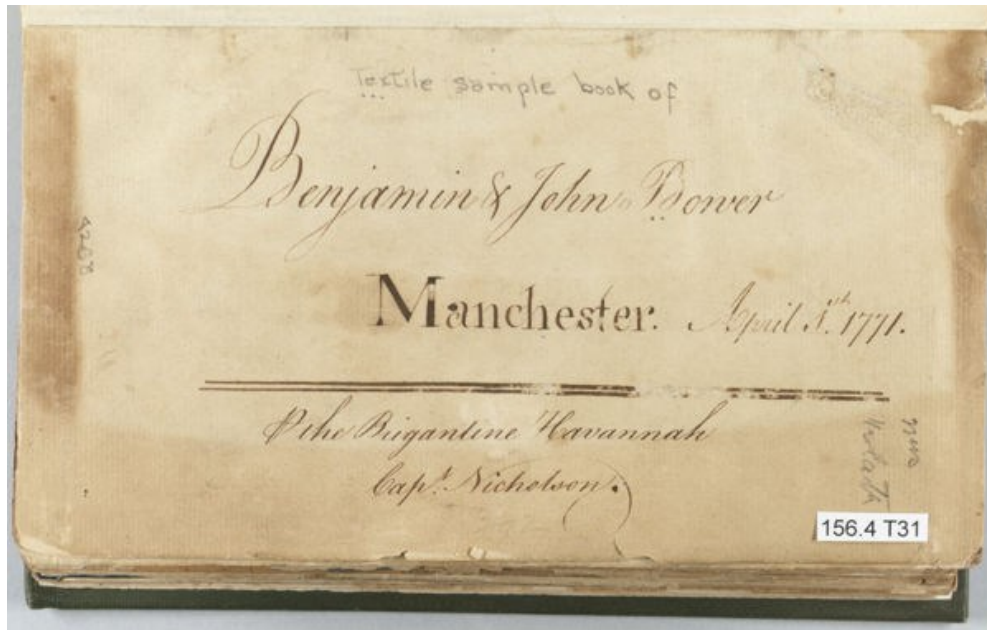
The beauty of these samples is not only related to its complicated source and use, but also how the cloth captures such a unique period of early Industrialization. At this particular moment in history, being a weaver meant you had secure employment and worked in a cottage industry that provided a certain amount of autonomy without having to relocate to densely populated industrial centers that were just on the horizon.⁴

¹ Deidre McClosekey, "Review of The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain, (Times Higher Education Supplement, Jan. 15, 2004), 3

² Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, Collection of the Rogers Fund.

³ Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (First Vintage Books, New York, 2015), 84

⁴ Cora Granata, & Cheryl A Koos, *Modern Europe 1750 to the Present* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008) 31.



Textile Sample Book, 1771 Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Textile Sample Book, 1771 Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Mechanization of weaving, other than the fly shuttle, had yet to reach the industrial landscape. While spinning mills were in full industrial production, engineers hadn't developed dependable and efficient weaving mills. That would happen between 1805 and 1825, with the efforts of Edmund Cartwright and his brother John Cartwright. Prior to the invention of the power loom,

approximately 250,000 handweavers were employed in the UK alone.⁵ In essence, this fabric was some of the last pre-industrialized produced fabric.

In an age where handweavers are far and few in the post-industrial economy, the thought of 250,000 weavers in one small area might be difficult to imagine. However, as one who grew up in a textile mill town where the name Arckwright referred to the mill down the street, not the patent holder of the spinning frame that accelerated industrialization, living next to a textile worker was commonplace. Living in this community, I experienced the impact of the constant cycle of industrialization that demands greater efficiencies, lower labor costs, and increased market shares. The industry was waning as textile mills were displaced by off-shore producers and technological improvements.⁶ While working in a mill was not glamorous, it provided much needed income for rural communities. Mills created communities and mill workers took pride in the work that they did. So, on one hand, as a weaver, I appreciate the invention of Kay's shuttle having used the evolution of this device in production myself, but on the other, I could empathize with the weavers who ran John Kay out of town.⁷ He was disrupting an entire ecosystem of production.

As an artist, I incorporate handweaving using it to reference my own textile heritage—as someone who grew up in a textile mill town in the aftermath of post-colonialism and slavery.



In Pieces, Sewn Handwoven Cloth, Maggie Leininger 2018

⁵ Geoffrey Timmins, *The Last Shift: The Decline of Handloom Weaving in Nineteenth-century Lancashire* (Manchester University Press ND, 1993), 35

⁶ Betsy Wakefield Teter, *Textile Town: Spartanburg County South Carolina* (Hub City Writers Project, 2002), 265

⁷ J. de L. Mann & A.P. Wadsworth, "The Introduction of the Fly Shuttle" *The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire, 1600-1780* (Manchester University Press, 1931), 451.

Growing up in the South, the history and relationship to cotton runs deep. Old plantation homes, some of which were built in colonial times, stand as a testimonial far greater than a Confederate statue to the era when Cotton was King and labor was enslaved. Ironically, some of the old slave cabins of Gullah heritage were preserved by property owners who tried to hang on to the last vestiges of their familial estate by renting them out to immigrants until the 1990's as demonstrated by the McLeod Plantation, one of the last plantations to be built in South Carolina prior to the Civil War. Another plantation prominent in my childhood was Walnut Grove plantation. Given to the Moore family through a land grant by King George III in 1765, the plantation was considered to be in the Back Country of the colony far from the more profitable areas closer to the coast. Cross Keys Plantation, only two miles from my southern home, boasts the historical connection to Jefferson Davis as he arrived in 1865 unannounced for lunch on April 30th while traveling through the area. Mrs. Warren Davis was their hostess, not revealing their identities until their departure. I mention this history, not as a boastful Southerner, but as one who is coming to terms with the sordid history of textiles in the United States. I have long envied the textile histories of other cultures such as Japan, Laos, Vietnam, or Peru where making cloth is so deeply imbedded with a cultural understanding of place, tradition, and methods that don't seem to conjure the uncomfortable history of my Southern heritage that encompasses colonialism, slavery, and the complex issues related to labor and sustainability of a capitalist economy.



McLeod Plantation, Slave Quarter, Image Courtesy of Charleston County Parks

The region of my childhood was often referred to as the Lowell of the South. In the aftermath of Reconstruction, industrialists were quick to pounce on the opportunities of shortening the supply chain between the raw materials and the finished product. They built railroad lines extending out to ports and continued to export cloth at even a greater rate due to cheap labor they procured from the rural farming and mountain communities of the South. They built villages, towns, and cities that flourished and then slowly shrank over time as the search for yet even cheaper labor moved on. Buffalo Mill in 1984, was actively in operation during my childhood. However, in 2014 when I photographed the site,

the two mill towers were all that remained.

This is my textile heritage. It is what I carry with me to my loom as I weave cloth for functional or artistic purposes. I contemplate the relationship between labor and the resulting object from the spun yarn to the woven textile. Making anything by hand connects one to raw materials, slows our brains to consider how to manipulate the materials, and increases the value of the finished object. In a contemporary landscape that both embraces the Do It Yourself (DIY) and the ability to get anything we want at any time, where does the crafted, considered object fit? Is it an object made in reaction to the institutionalization of production? Is the action of making a form of social/eco justice? Can it still be a viable means of economic sustainability? Historically, there have been movements that have incorporated some of these issues such as Gandhi's actions of using hand-spinning and handweaving to actively gain national independence or the repositioning of craft within a post-industrial model by the Arts & Crafts movements that took place in the latter half of the 19th century and early 20th century. Might there be room for such alternative models of production today?



Buffalo Mill, Buffalo South Carolina ca 1980

Buffalo Mill, Buffalo South Carolina, 2015

In 2016 I was offered a research fellowship from the Kentucky Historical Society to study the Churchill Weavers collection. I was eager to learn how a cottage industry that lasted 85 years could provide insight to some of the questions I mentioned above and to also explore any relationship that might exist between the Churchill Weavers and the preceding social movements of craft production in Appalachia that included the Fireside Industries and the Appalachian Craft Revival.

D.C. Churchill's connection to textiles began in India where he was serving as a missionary. With a background in engineering, he invented his own version of the fly shuttle enabling khadi weavers in the community he was serving to weave faster. Developing the same object that essentially displaced their craft in the first place, he was able to increase the production rate of local weavers by 82 percent⁸. How might this experience of working with khadi weavers influenced the Churchills' decision to locate their weaving business in Berea, Kentucky, an area steeped in the history of the Fireside Industries and the Appalachian Craft Revival? The

⁸ Ernest Barrett Chamberlain, *The Churchills of Oberlin*. Oberlin, OH (The Ohio Historical and Improvement Organization, 1965), 81-5.

Churchill's certainly benefitted from the success of these initiatives as craft revivals captured the imagination of an idyllic past through the production and sales of craft objects such as the coverlet. Handed down by English and Scottish immigrant weavers, these patterns spread among communities throughout Appalachia as handweaving was still a necessity for many until the early 20th century. The Fireside Industries in the 1890's provided a way for mountain residents to pass these historical patterns onto future generations while simultaneously obtain hard to find income.⁹ Paul Greenhalgh writes that craft embodies several things. One is the vernacular, a term that describes 'the cultural produce of a community, the things collectively made, spoken and performed...It carries the mystique of being the authentic voice of society (often associated) with pre-industrial, rural communities.'¹⁰ The Fireside Industries clearly demonstrates how effective the vernacular can be as a marketing tool, as income from coverlet sales reached \$1,500 in 1903 which in today's economy is equivalent to \$41,000.¹¹ Interestingly, Greenhalgh continues that this ideology has fueled both the left and right political agendas throughout Europe & North America since industrialization. The vernacular "captures the pop culture of an ethnic grouping and has become a nostalgic invention"¹² that exists outside the elitist identity of professionalism of any kind that extends even to the current political climate in the United States. And, according to Bruce Metcalf in his essay, *Replacing the Myth of Modernism*, this ethnic/vernacular attitude still resonates as he observes "a pervasive anti-intellectual bias" in the craft world today.¹³ While he is alluding to a lack of theoretical discourse around craft, it is clear that craft still has strong associations with the vernacular that Greenhalgh outlines.



Coverlet Samples from the Churchill Weavers Collection, Kentucky Historical Society

⁹ Sarah Stopenhagen, Broomfield, "Weaving Social Change: Berea College Fireside Industries and Reform in Appalachia" (Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings, 2006), 297.

¹⁰ Paul Greenhalgh, "The History of Craft" Peter Dormer, Ed. *The Culture of Craft* (Manchester University Press, 1997), 31.

¹¹ Inflation Calculator, www.calculator.net/inflation-calculator.html.

¹² Paul Greenhalgh, "The History of Craft", Peter Dormer, Ed. *The Culture of Craft* (Manchester University Press, 1997), 32.

¹³ Bruce Metcalf, "Replacing the Myth of Modernism", Edited by Sandra Alfody *NeoCraft*. (The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 2007), 7.

The Settlement Movement was another response to the after-math of industrialization as large population shifts occurred from rural to urban industrial centers. In the Appalachian Mountains of the United States, these settlement programs, or schools, provided skills and educational resources to extremely isolated rural communities. Pi Beta Phi Settlement School, now Arrowmont, and Pine Mountain Settlement School both served the Appalachia region, and both were organized and managed by women. The content of the programs highlights another aspect of craft that Greenhalgh discusses, and that has to do with the politics of work. Prominent theorists such as Marx, Ruskin, and Morris intensively discussed the relationship between the worker and the product. Marx's fundamental understanding of "those who controlled work—the means of production—controlled the world" influenced movements such as the Arts & Crafts Revival. In reaction to industrialization, William Morris touted the power of creativity being able to provide an equitable society of fulfilled workers. Such models of alternative production provided a form of resistance to the industrial model of organized labor and production, allowing the creator to have more autonomy and personal investment in the objects they were producing. According to Greenhalgh, Arts & Crafts Revivals were "the most successful construction of a theory and practice of ethical art...humankind would be liberated through communal creativity."¹⁴

While the Churchill Weavers did not seem to have an apparent social agenda as they were keenly interested in running a profitable and sustainable business, it did provide an alternative model of production that could exist within a market structure more closely aligned with the capital models of industrialized production. The Churchill Weavers managed to create a company providing niche textile objects to a wide variety of retailers all around the country including cities such as Chicago, New York, and L.A. Though they started out as a small enterprise, the Churchill Weavers produced textile goods of all sorts and sold to retailers such as Neiman Marcus, Bloomingdale's, Lord & Taylor, Saks Fifth Avenue and Sears. At one point, they operated 150 looms, employing weavers in and around the area.¹⁵ They developed a line of fabrics and goods that included both traditional patterns and innovative designs using experimental materials as evidenced by yardage for designer Gerhardt Knodel. The Churchill Weavers not only wove material for wearable goods but also for interior use for the amphitheater at Toledo Art Museum and experimental testing material for NASA's space suits in the 1960's.¹⁶ Clearly, the Churchill Weavers were more than a mom & pop cottage industry, yet they remained outside the boundaries of traditional industrial production. They demonstrated that a weaving business could successfully carve a niche service that utilized outdated systems of production, in this case using hand looms versus power looms. Might their success be attributed to the allure of the region by our need to acquire an authentic experience embodied in a hand-crafted object otherwise known as the vernacular that Greenhalgh points out? Maybe the retailers had a vague understanding of the socialist foundation embodied in the Arts & Craft Revival movements that had shaped a generation of consumers. Or, possibly, the Churchill Weavers had a far greater nimble

¹⁴ Paul Greenhalgh, "The History of Craft", Peter Dormer, Ed. *The Culture of Craft* (Manchester University Press, 1997), 35.

¹⁵ Philis Alvic, *Weavers of the Southern Highlands* (University Press of Kentucky, 2003) 132-3

¹⁶ Adam MacPharlin, *Churchill Weavers: By the Yard*. (Blog: Kentucky Historical Society, 2018), 1

system of production that allowed for diversity in their products lines and the ability to adapt quickly. Again, it is important to recognize that they did successfully operate for 85 years, much longer than even larger scale mills in neighboring states.

So, what exactly is the allure of the non-industrially produced object? As demonstrated by the Churchill Weavers, pre-industrial processes were used in making the cloth. Each loom was individually operated. Yet the appeal of having something that appears to be more unique, more intentional, and made in partnership or cooperation with the laborer holds our attention. The allure lies in the connection that exists between the maker and the user. It never fails to surprise me when I weave and sell something like dish towel how often people comment upon the fact that it's too nice to use for every day, that they would hate to ruin it. Yet, the same person would easily go to Target and purchase a similar dish towel without once thinking about the connection between the maker/machine, the raw materials, and the purpose for the object. According to Metcalf, "craft objects reinforce personal identity...the marks of hand fabrication symbolize the uniqueness of an individual life...staving off the anxiety of anonymity."¹⁷

The collection of artifacts at the Kentucky Historical Society that included the copious amounts of samples produced by the Churchill Weavers provided a peek into the authenticity that we yearn. Handling some of the handwoven, handspun linens that might have been used to inspire specific lines of production, I felt a direct connection between myself and the Holloway family who were some of the first settlers to grow cotton and linen.



*Handwoven Cotton & Linen Counterpane by the Holloway Family 1810,
Henderson County, KY. Collection of the Kentucky Historical Society*

Looking at a counterpane woven from material they cultivated and wove by hand in 1810, I could imagine the hours spent tilling the soil, retting the flax, ginning the cotton, spinning the yarn, weaving the cloth and stitching the designs. This cloth embodies the essence of our existence, material labor, and our identity. In a world starved of authentic meaning and

¹⁷ Bruce Metcalf, "Replacing the Myth of Modernism", Edited by Sandra Alfody *NeoCraft*. (The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 2007), 21.

experiences, objects such as these, along with other handcrafted objects, provides an opportunity to engage with one another through time even if it is just by examining the mundane, such as the dish towel. It's this human connection that we miss most about living in an industrialized and now digitalized world and why, especially as we come to terms with the textile's role in postcolonialism, that we will continue to seek out processes and experiences of making that connect us to each other.

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