

In a front room on a suburban street a woman contentedly clicks her needles, adding the final touches to a carefully constructed cardigan for her young granddaughter. Next door, teenage girls take turns with a hand-me-down sewing machine, racing against time to transform ideas and fabric into fashion reality for an evening out dancing. Down the road, a middle-aged man pores over a YouTube video to master the art of darning, aiming to bring new life to a much-loved sweatshirt.

All of these makers, and all of these garments, are folk fashion. I use the term as an umbrella to encompass everyone involved in making or mending their own clothes, and everything they make. The term carries no judgement in terms of skill or aesthetic; everything within the sphere of homemade clothes is included.

My use of 'folk' in this context is somewhat audacious. Although the term carries a great deal of cultural baggage – perhaps evoking, in clothing terms, images of 'peasant' styles and traditional motifs – I use 'folk' simply to indicate non-professionals creating work for their own enjoyment and self-expression. My understanding aligns with that of artists Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane, who in their 2005 Barbican exhibition *Folk Archive* defined folk art as 'the vast range of energetic and engaging local creativity from outside prescribed art arenas'.

A significant surge of interest in folk fashion has arisen in recent years. As long ago as 2002, newspaper articles were heralding the return of knitting; sewing followed a few years later, and today mending is gaining notable cultural currency. These practices had already made the shift from widespread domestic duty to optional leisure activity in the decades following the second world war. The 21st century has seen them gain a new lease of life, supercharged by the connective power of the internet – and, ironically, driven by a desire to switch off from screen-dominated life.

Despite its marginality within wider fashion culture, the folk fashion world is a bustling ecosystem of activity. New converts are rubbing shoulders with old hands and niche areas of interest are blossoming as geographically dispersed makers share knowledge and inspire one another. Instagram challenges, blogger meetups, artisan yarn festivals, mendathons, craft-based social networks: folk fashion is a cornucopia of community initiatives, online/offline hybrids and micro-scale enterprises. This resurgence of activity has brought positive associations to the fore. In many spheres, knitting, sewing and mending are now seen as hip and desirable activities. Yet negative associations linger; far too often, these practices are still dismissed as uncreative and unskilled domestic fripperies.

Many folk fashion makers are motivated by a desire to bypass the shocking environmental and social problems associated with the frenetic fashion industry. But although it is often assumed that the slowness of making will slow consumption, the reality is much more complex. There are makers, like the teenage girls mentioned above, who churn out new garments at an astounding rate, and as one maker I interviewed pointed out, 'In some ways fast sewing can be just as wasteful as fast fashion.' And what about the items that don't turn out as desired? Homemade clothes are often perceived as clumsy and unappealing in comparison with shop-bought alternatives, and a disappointing project is unlikely to be worn for long.

Despite these complications, folk fashion carries great radical potential. Fashion is an important means of constructing identity and connecting with others. For people who lack the skills to make and mend, these social functions can only be accessed through

consumption of mass-produced goods. Folk fashion provides a satisfying alternative; when we make, mend and rework our own garments, we find ways to express ourselves that step far outside the shopping-based norm. And making gives us the opportunity to explore the amazing diversity of what I term the 'fashion commons' – the endless variety of the world's fashion cultures – more fully than the limited interpretations offered to us by the commercial system.

Folk fashion, then, has the power to disrupt the harmful dominance of commercialised fashion. But to realise this potential, we need to shift from the margins to the mainstream, making our projects and practices more visible and celebrating, rather than cringing at, their idiosyncracies. Furthermore, we must consciously reject the capitalist mindset of 'more' and instead fully embrace the often joyful, sometimes frustrating, always inefficient journey of making.

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