

Reduce, Re-use, recycle! Nordic industries and sustainability in the 20th century

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During the 1970s, buttons with the catchy message of “Reduce, re-use, recycle” became commonplace in the US and helped raise awareness of conservation needs and show how everyday households could make conscious efforts to help preserve the environment and save on limited natural resources. However, the practice behind these three R’s was not new, and had always had an important presence in business life. The principle of returning wasted material such as metals into the production process and for businesses working to improve natural resource efficiency, has a history that precedes the 1970s.

In this session we investigate how different industries in the Nordic countries across the 20th century engaged in reduction of material use through economizing their production, through re-use strategies of what had already been produced, or how recycling of existing goods could be turned into a business idea.

Business history of recycling and reuse in 20th century Finland

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”Circular economy” is currently a popular concept, but we argue that it has a long and unknown history in Finland. There have always been companies who have based their business models on reuse of materials or minimization of inputs. These companies have, for example, collected and reused paper, metal and other materials, tried to develop energy-saving production methods, or utilize industrial residues, which otherwise would be wasted. Such activities have been particularly widespread during wars, periods of postwar reconstruction, and other crises, when the societies have suffered from shortage of raw materials, semi-manufactures, energy and food. Harvard professor Geoffrey Jones has called these kinds of business models “accidental sustainability”. We can build our analysis partly on published company histories and other research, some of which was written by ourselves, and partly on interviews and on the extensive and usually open business archives.

Creating Value Out of Waste: The Transformation of the Swedish Waste and Recycling Sector 1970-2016

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This article examines the growth of the waste and recycling sector in Sweden since the 1970s and seeks to identify the conditions for market growth and underlying business dynamics. The article identifies a slow growth at aggregated level in 1970s and 1980s, while a major shift towards higher growth rates took off only in the mid-1990s. The article traces a number of long-term parallel developments that shaped the conditions for the breakthrough in the 1990s;

the oil crises and a perceived future resource scarcity in the 1970s but also governmental policies that raised the demand for recycling services in other industries, including manufacturing and brewery industry.

A national aluminium strategy diverted. Norwegian aluminium industry meets World War II

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This paper argues that rise of the Norwegian aluminium industry after World War II should be understood on the background of Norwegian production competence, a Norwegian-owned economical production system that revolutionized global aluminium production in the 1930s and 1940s. This interpretation goes against the two dominating features put forward to explain the rise of the postwar Norwegian aluminium industry, being 1) constructed by the German occupation power and 2) financed after the war by the Norwegian state. I will argue that a group of Norwegians and Swedes represented an alternative investment group that, firstly, got hindered by the war and, secondly, had incremented themselves in the war and could not play the role that was taken by the state in building on the German efforts.

Advocating faster fashion: cultural and technological perspectives to knitted garments and artificial fibers in Finland of the 1960s and 1970s

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The global Fashion system builds on the assumption that consumers always want more and cheaper outfits. One of the features of the apparel industry is its constant relocation after lower labour costs. The other is the use of cheaper materials, above all synthetic fibers. In this paper, we argue that considering the long history of re-using and remaking clothes, and the many cultural meanings associated with textiles and garments as assets, the idea of constantly changing wardrobe is radical, even provoking. The growing consumption of new types products, in our case ready-made elastic garments, indicates cultural change. (Strasser 1999, 267-268; Shove & al 2012, 12.) Our aim is to understand this change, that made consumers adapt clothes that where of less quality than before. We focus on garment production, marketing, and consumption in Finland of the 1970s. At the time, the living standards in Finland rose rapidly and the purchasing power grew steadily.

Most garments in the Finnish markets were of domestic production. Over this decade, Finland also topped as the 14th largest garment exporter (Dickerson 1999, 194). This short heyday was due to export to EFTA and EC countries, yet above all to the large Soviet markets. We examine in particular the production and use of apparel made of knitted fabrics (distinct from woven fabrics), which at the time were increasingly made of synthetic fibers. Hence, the finished products were cheap, washable, colourful, and light to wear. At the same time, the product lifespan of such garments shortened. Who were the producers and how were these marketed for the Finnish consumers? Blaszczyk & Pouillard (2018, 23) have argued that the chemical industry corporations, such as the American DuPont, have been invisible players of the of the post-Second World War fashion system. Looking at the advertisement in the Finnish magazines, it is not even clear, who, in fact, is behind the commercials advocating novel

lifestyles? How did the rather small, domestic Finnish garment manufacturers co-operate with the chemical-textile giants Courtaulds, DuPont and other producers of synthetic fibers? We analyse this process both as a shift in consumption practices, connected to the wider cultural context, and as a production shift, connected to technological, institutional, and market changes. Drawing from consumption history, we argue that favoring lower-quality products and accepting the short lifespan were signs of dynamic and forward-facing attitude. (Strasser 1999, 275-278; Trentmann 2016, 622–675.) How people dressed in the Western World changed radically since the late 1960s. The casualization of fashion was particularly eminent in the Nordic countries. Fabrics that thus far were generally considered suitable for underwear or sports, were increasingly accepted as casual public outfits (concerning Finland, Ekholm & Frisk 2019, on trends in Sweden, Gråbacke 2015). The casualization reflected changing social values in terms of age, gender, and class, but was also connected to technological changes and changes in everyday life. These changes range from warming of the houses, transportation and hygiene standards attached to clothing. Finally, the novel materials carried associations to the future from space travelling to Unisex clothing and general equality – all features utilized by the advertisers. We combine and contrast three types of sources: statistical data (contemporary investigations) capturing the volume of consumption, advertisement in selected magazines, and a company-level look at selected number of producers of Finnish knitted garments. We start the analysis by the quantitative aspects: volumes of production and import to estimate consumption. We study what was marketed for the consumers; what materials, technologies, which companies and which patents. We analyse the material concerning cultural meanings by using flexible categorizing by Atlas.ti software. This qualitative analysis concentrates on recognizing the discourses and understanding the logic that might be different from the present day. In this case, the change to the post-war economic expansion and rise of the mature Nordic consumer societies.

How to reuse a strategic stockpile? The Norwegian ferroalloy industry and the end of the British stockpile program in the late 1950s

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This paper examines the British Government programme to dispose of its stockpile of strategic materials in the second half of the 1950s and the ways that this disposal programme affected business interests. The disposal programme stirred up a host of diplomatic and industrial complications, and the main aim of the paper is to analyse how the British Government tried to handle these complications, in the process interacting with private business interests and foreign governments.