TranscUlturAl, vol. 6.1 (2014), 97-107.
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Transatlantic Translations of the Button-down Shirt

The button-down shirt is an icon of at least two nationally-determined fashion traditions: The United States' ostensibly upper-class Ivy League style and Britain's ostensibly working-class subcultural street style. This article explores how the button-down shirt has been translated in these different national contexts. I will use Roland Barthes' notion of 'fashion narrative' to elucidate the close relationship between the button-down shirt and the 'national imaginaries' of the United States and Britain. I will first discuss the origins of these two fashion narratives and explore the links between them. To illustrate the lasting impact of these fashion narratives, I will then compare the modern-day publicity materials of two shirt companies closely associated with the button-down shirt in their respective national contexts.

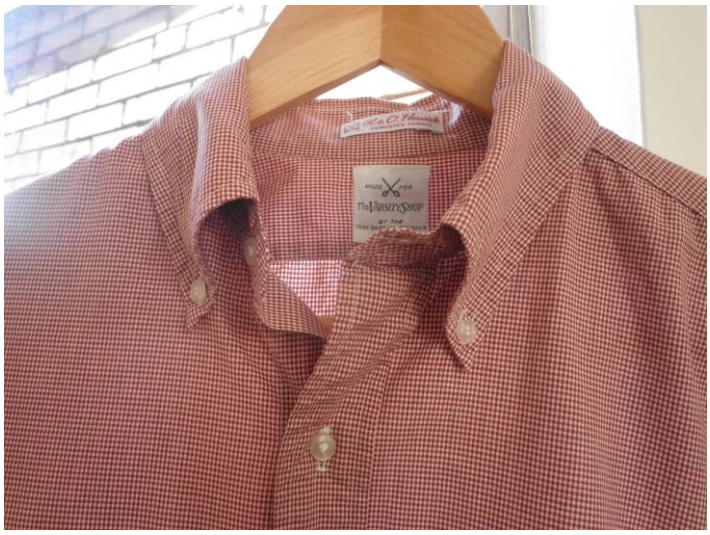

PHOTO 1 Caption: An original Troy Guild (a 1960s campus competitor of Gant, much sought-after by collectors of the Ivy Look)

In simplest terms, the button-down shirt is a type of shirt on which the collar points are fastened by buttons. Most often seen in menswear, it can be worn formally with a tie or casually, without one. More than just a shirt, it is what fashion scholar Michael Carter, by way of the social theorist Georg Simmel, would refer to as a 'fashion classic' (38). Along with other iconic garments like blue jeans and the 'little black dress' it seem to possess an internal aesthetic coherence that resists the vagaries of fashion. Yet garments do not simply emerge as fully-formed, free-floating cultural objects; they are laden with meanings. These meanings are formed in discourse, in relation to other texts. Roland Barthes uses the term 'fashion narrative' to describe this process (247). Barthes is primarily interested in how descriptive texts such as advertising copy work to transform the 'real garment' into the 'represented garment', but his notion of fashion narrative encompasses everything that gives a garment meaning (8). In this sense, there is a paratextual relationship between fashion and everything from film, to music, to ideas. As Elizabeth Wilson argues, fashion is "an aesthetic medium for the expression of ideas, desires and beliefs circulating in society" (9) and Barthes's notion of fashion narrative allows us to look at the repositories of cultural meaning that fashion

draws upon. One such repository is the set of nationally-bound cultural meanings that is sometimes referred to as the 'national imaginary' (Walsh 5-7)

From its moment of invention, the button-down shirt has been informed by the narratives through which both the United States and Britain have been imagined in fashion. This has been an ongoing and dialogic process. A fashion narrative found on the Brooks Brothers' website claims that:

> At a polo match in England, John E. Brooks, grandson of the founder, noticed something peculiar about the players' collars: they were buttoned down so as to prevent their flapping in the wind. John brought this discovery back to Brooks Brothers, and thus was born the Button-Down shirt, a Brooks Brothers classic and what some have called "the most imitated item in fashion history." ("Our Heritage")

We see in the example above how Brooks Brothers translated a garment worn by Britain upper-class polo players into a uniquely American style. The story above may or may not be true, but this myth of American entrepreneurism and British aristocratic refinement, drawing on two distinct national imaginaries, forms a crucial part of the shirt's fashion narrative.

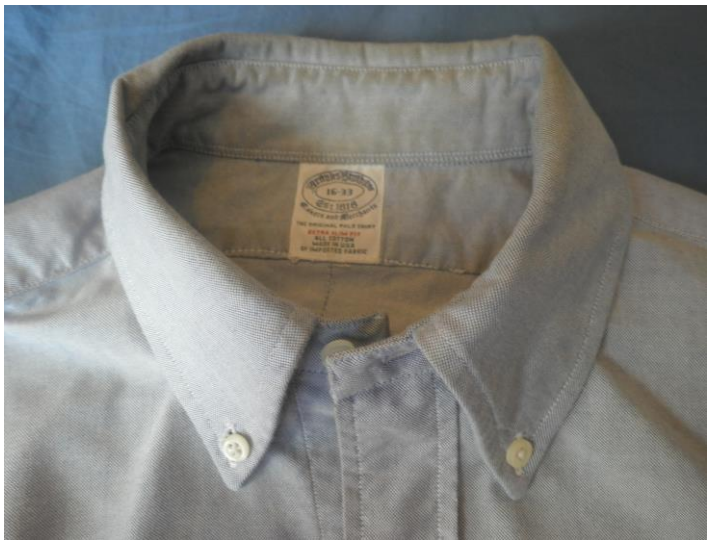

Photo 2 Caption: Contemporary Brooks Brothers Button-Down

The button-down shirt plays an important role in the Ivy Look, a less tangible fashion narrative that brings the button-down shirt into the American national imaginary. Along with chinos, penny loafers and sack jackets, the button-down shirt was at the heart of the Ivy look (Marsh and Gaul 48-50). The Ivy Look is often interpreted quite literally as the garb of the elite American Ivy League colleges. Colin McDowell describes the look as "well-bred" and analogous to Saville Row, making it out to be the clothing of the American aristocracy (97). The recent Ivy Style exhibit at Manhattan's Fashion Institute of Technology also emphasised the look's elite origins (Weiner 96-100). In his 1965 essay 'The Secret Vice', Tom Wolfe described how:

> At Yale and Harvard, boys think nothing of going over and picking up a copy of *Leer, Poke, Feel, Prod, Tickle, Hot Whips, Modern Mammaries,* and other such magazines, and reading them right out in the open. Sex is not taboo. But when the catalogue comes from Brooks Brothers or J. Press, that's something they whip out only in *private.* And they can hardly wait. They're in the old room there poring over all that tweedy, thatchy language about "Our Exclusive Shirtings," the "Finest Lairdsmoor Heather Hopsacking," "Clearspun Rocking Druid Worsteds," and searching like detectives for the marginal differences, the shirt with a flap over the breast pocket (J. Press), the shirt with no breast pocket (Brooks), the pants with military pockets, the polo coat with welted seams—
> ….and so on and on, through study and disastrous miscalculations, until they learn, at last, the business of marginal differentiations almost as perfectly as those teen-agers who make their mothers buy them button-down shirts and then make the poor old weepies sit up all night punching a buttonhole and sewing on a button in the back of the collar because they bought the wrong damn shirt, one of those hinkty ones without the button in the back. (266)

It is true that the Ivy Look has its roots in the elite prep schools and universities of the East Coast of the United States—this narrative of privilege and affluence formed a powerful fashion narrative into which consumers bought in. However, by the time of its mid-1960s peak, the Ivy Look had become mass fashion for American men (Mears "Ivy Style: Heyday of the mid-century" 96). It was also popular in the black community, especially among musicians (Boyer 137; Marsh and Gaul 122). "Ivy Style' came to refer to both a campus and post-collegiate look during a period in which college had become much more accessible as a result of the GI Bill and the subsequent expansion of postsecondary education. As such, the Ivy Look was closely bound up with The United States' post-war national imaginary of classlessness, democratisation, technological innovations and lifestyle improvements. It was a product of the ready-to-wear industry which Gilles Lipovetsky argues is the pinnacle of fashion's democratizing drive (95). McDowell traces ready-to-wear's beginnings back to the late 19th century, when Americans shattered the snobbish British assumption that a man could only be well-dressed if his clothes were custom-tailored. He writes "the Americans were just as convinced that good-quality, stylish clothing could be bought off the peg at a fraction of the cost" (81). Evidence of the Ivy Look's democratic nature can be found as early as 1952 in the work of then-contemporary historian Frederick Allen, who wrote:

> Forty of fifty years ago the countryman in the metropolis was visibly a "hayseed"; the purchaser of inexpensive men's clothing was betrayed by his tight-waisted jackets and bulbous-toed shoes. Today the difference in appearance between a steelworker (or clerk) and a high executive is hardly noticeable to the casual eye. (219)

The Ivy Look's popularity waned in the late 60s and with its incorporation into 'prep' during the 1980s, it again became a symbol of privilege (see Birnbach). This return to American aristocratic narratives can be seen most clearly in the branding of Polo Ralph Lauren, a company started by a former Brooks Brothers employee (Mears "Ivy Style: Revival and Renewal" 148). With the shift to a post-industrial economy, the national narratives of democratization and increased living standards

with which the Ivy Look had been associated are by now a thing of the past (Harvey). Nevertheless, stores like Brooks Brothers and J Press, online mail-order companies such as Land's End and L.L. Bean and the cultish devotion of a hard-core of followers have ensured the survival of Ivy Style as The United States' unofficial national dress.

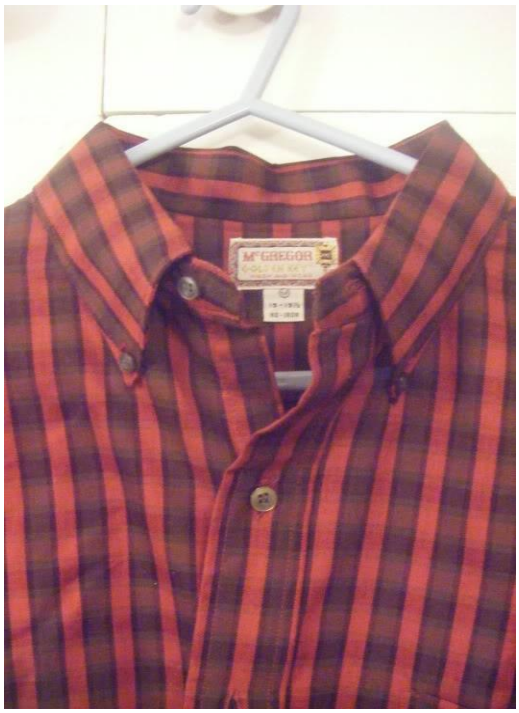

Photo 3 Caption: Mass-market 1960s American button-down

The Ivy Look travelled from America to Britain as the United States exported not just its shirts, but its national imaginary. As Jeffrey Miller has demonstrated in relation to television, American cultural products have taken on new meanings in dialogue with British culture (xi-xvii). Similarly, Iain Chambers argues that the importing of American mass cultural artefacts along with the flattening of the class system and the prosperity of the 1960s led to the emergence of a new type of British popular culture *through* American consumer culture. He writes that while American post-war culture was not necessarily more democratic, "against the narrow traditions and austere institutions of British life, it certainly represented a more extensive and imaginative sense of the possible" (42). The teenagers of the post-war period, especially those who were members of spectacular youth subcultures like the Teddy Boys and the Mods, can be seen as a sort of vanguard in their articulation of a distinctly British identity through American commodities and mass consumer culture. Their frenetic consumption of clothing, music and leisure, while inspired by imported American styles, came to be a lasting marker of the British experience. The ongoing recycling of subcultural looks and rampant nostalgia for the heyday of British youth cult has ensured their place in Britain's national imaginary.

The fashion narrative of the button-down shirt in Britain provides an excellent example of this process. Worn by African-American musicians and US airmen, the shirts inspired working-class

fans of modern jazz, known as modernists, to seek out the shirts they saw on record covers (Hewitt 37-39). As the modernists evolved into Mods and their tastes shifted from jazz to American rhythm & blues and soul, the Ivy influence persisted. London Mod and musician Georgie Fame describes how

> We used to dry and dress like the GIs... There used to be a little shop down the end of Shaftesbury Avenue – Austins. We used to spend our wages in Austins. You could get the Bermuda jackets, the Ivy League look, the button-down collars and all that. (Hewitt 57-58)

As Mod became more popular in the wake of headline-grabbing clashes with rockers, newer members were more attracted to the yobishness than to the idea of dropping a week's wage on an imported American shirt (Barnes 123-128; Rawlings 66-83). A shrewd businessman by the name of Ben Sherman recognized a potential market and made his cheaper version of the American button-down available on high streets across the country. The Ben Sherman button-down's image became closely aligned with Mod and the company continues to trade on its subcultural heritage (Hewitt and Rawlings 21-26; 135-147).

As the 60s wore on Mod split in two, with its more art school tendencies leading to the psychedelic scene while working-class purist Mods came to be called hard Mods and, eventually, Skinheads (Chenoune 254; Melly 127-128). Like the earliest Mods, the early adopters of Skinhead were heavily influenced by the Ivy League Look. Dexys Midnight Runners' singer Kevin Rowland reminisces of his days as a 'peanut', before Skinhead had been given its name:

> I would see the occasional guy who had this all-American look; immaculately pressed American trousers with a one-inch turn-up—the trousers would be worn short just like the Yanks, big beautiful shoes, a very short GI haircut, a Careers Club shirt (button-down soft-collar, half-sleeves in summer) worn slightly baggy, with a loose pleat at the back, and perhaps a Harrington. (99)

By 1969 Skinhead had become mass fashion for Britain's working-class youth, and the Ivy aspirations of the peanuts were largely forgotten. The Skinheads preferred the more affordable button-downs of Ben Sherman and its British competitors Jaytex and Brutus Trimfit (Ferguson 37-47; Hewitt 89-91).

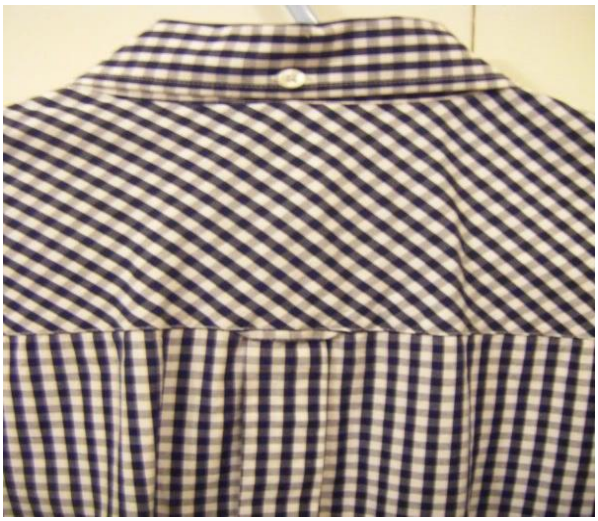

Photo 4 Caption: Back-collar button and locker loop on a Ben Sherman

Divested of its American paratextual meanings, this cultural interchange placed the button-down shirt within a very British fashion narrative of working-class youth subculture. This was a sometimes violent mass culture of the young, a subterranean, cultish world where clothes and music were everything (cf. Hall and Jefferson; Hewitt; Muggleton). Mythologized, historicized and commodified, British youth subcultures are now tightly-bound up in the British national imaginary. In the early 1990s, Britpop bands like Blur and Oasis declared their Britishness by dressing like Mods and Blur even got Phil Daniels, the star of Mod film *Quadrophenia*, to sing on their hit single 'Park Life' (Bailey i). At the closing ceremony of the 2012 Olympics in London, 50 Mods on scooters rode around the stadium in a tribute to Britishness. The Skinhead subculture was tarnished by the racism of a small but vocal minority of its members, but this did not prevent its incorporation into the British national imaginary (Hebdige 58; 166). An excellent example of the way in which Skinhead iconography was incorporated into British popular culture can be seen in Weetabix's 1980s mascots: a gang of anthropomorphic wheat cakes who dressed in Skinhead clothes and spoke threateningly in cockney accents ("Assault Course," "Energy Course" "Hunger Pangs," "School Fuel"). Similarly, Persil ran an advert for its washing power where a young Skinhead searches frantically for his grey shirt only to find that his mum has washed it and that it is actually white. The shirt is, of course, a button-down and in the final scene we see the Skinhead strutting proudly along in his white button-down ("Out on the Street").

Paul Willis observes that "While only a small minority of young people adopted the complete uniform of youth subcultures, large numbers drew on selective elements of the styles, creating their own meanings and uses from them" (87). From its place in the Mod and Skinhead cultures, then in the wardrobes of football casuals (see Thornton), Britpop and most recently, indie fans, the button-down shirt has taken on new meanings linked to the British national imaginary. One could describe the button-down as a symbol of working-class Britishness but this would not do justice to its semiotic complexity. The recycling and referencing of subcultural looks and images through popular

culture and their adoption by middle-class boys and men has made the British button-down a polysemic marker of everything from music fandom to Britishness to an interest in fashion.

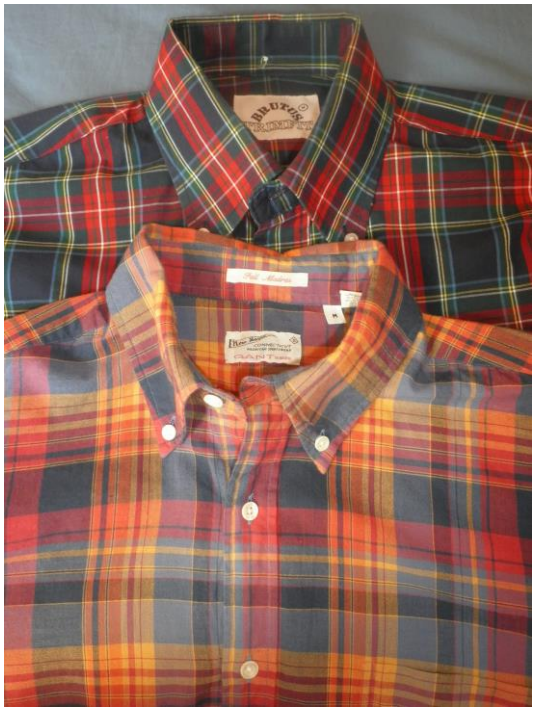

Photo 5 Caption: The narcissism of small differences

If we turn our attention to the 2011 Brutus Trimfit lookbook, we can see how British youth subcultures continue to "narrate," so to speak, the button-down shirt. Brutus was a British manufacturer that in the 1960s and early 1970s produced button-down shirts for the Skinhead market under the 'Brutus Trimfit' brand (Ferguson 42). The brand faded into obscurity, with vintage shirts trading hands for large sums of money in the Skinhead Revival scene, but has recently been re-launched by the original owner's son ("Story"). The new shirts have all the esoteric details of the much sought-after originals: long collar points, darts, a button on the back of the collar, a locker loop and a sown-in back pleat. However they are not just aimed at the Skinhead nostalgia market; the stockists, brand collaborations and limited t-shirts all point towards the more fashion-forward streetwear market.

In its 2011 lookbook Brutus Trimfit gestures towards its Skinhead heritage, but speaks in the vernacular of contemporary fashion. Here we see youths in Doc Marten boots, rolled-up jeans and button- down shirts larking about in front of the iconic red brick walls, brutalist council estates and modernist new towns of working-class Britain. These are the semiotic indicators of the Skinhead and the visual references are quite obviously the naturalistic skinhead photography Gavin Watson's *Skins* and Nick Knight's *Skinhead*. It looks as if Shane Meadows' 2006 film *This is England,* a nostalgic ode to the Skinheads culture of the director's youth, is also an inspiration. Despite the visual quoting of Skinhead signs and imagery, the models in the lookbook are very obviously styled and do not look like Skinheads; the small

details used by subculture members to identify one-another are all incorrect. The models' hair is too messy, their shirts un-tucked, and most egregious of all to Skinheads traditionalists, the top-buttons of their shirts have been done up. The images are very clearly referencing Skinhead imagery, not in order to sell to a subcultural market but to draw on the paratext of the nationally-determined fashion narrative of British youth subculture. Stripped of its overtones of class conflict, violence and marginality, subculture is commodified and historicized here in order to sell the shirts to the streetwear market. At the same time, the lookbook works to reproduce cultural meanings drawn from the British national imaginary, allowing Brutus Trimfit to sell its particular vision of 'Britishness.'

An excellent contrast to this fashion translation can be found in the publicity material for Gant's Yale Co-Op line. Gant was a manufacturer that competed with Brooks Brothers for supremacy in the Ivy Look market. They are credited with having introduced the button on the back of the collar and the locker loop, described in the Tom Wolfe passage quoted earlier in this article and copied by the British shirtmakers ("The Major Importance of Minor Things"). Like many brands, Gant has become someone diluted over the decades, but in recent years has reinvented itself as heritage brand to capture the current interest in Ivy Style. The Yale co-op line is named after the campus outfitter because, as Gant's publicity material claims:

> The students and professors at Yale in the 1960's [sic] were among GANT's first loyal customers. Their desire for a more comfortable, more relaxed fashion helped make New Haven, the hometown of both GANT and Yale, the style capital of the entire East Coast collegiate world.
>
> Now we are re-launching a legendary item, the Yale Co-op shirt, originally created exclusively for Yale. The shirt and its innovative features remain true to the 1960's [sic] original. This is the story of its origin. ("The Yale Co-Op Story")

The photos of models in button-downs with tweed jackets, taken against a historic and wealthy-looking collegiate backdrop, draw on the American fashion narrative of the Ivy Look. Apparently the Yale Co-op shirts are not actually very faithful recreations of the originals, but that is no surprise. Like Brutus, Gant uses a nationally-determined fashion narrative and a nostalgic appeal to an imagined nation in order to market their shirts. Their target market is much larger than the community of Ivy Style aficionados who spend their time on the internet comparing Yale Co-Op reproductions to the originals. The models do not look like students at Yale in the 1960s, but the setting and styling provide visual shorthand to the narratives of affluence and American tradition that we instantly recognise. The visual inspiration for the photos appears to come from *Take Ivy*, a Japanese collection of photographs taken at Ivy League campuses in the 1960s. This collector's item was re-published a few years ago to much fanfare. American affluence is such a common trope in advertising that viewed individually, the rather banal images in the Yale Co-op lookbook are entirely unremarkable. Viewed alongside the Brutus Trimfit lookbook, they highlight the differences that emerged from the transatlantic translation of the button-down shirt.

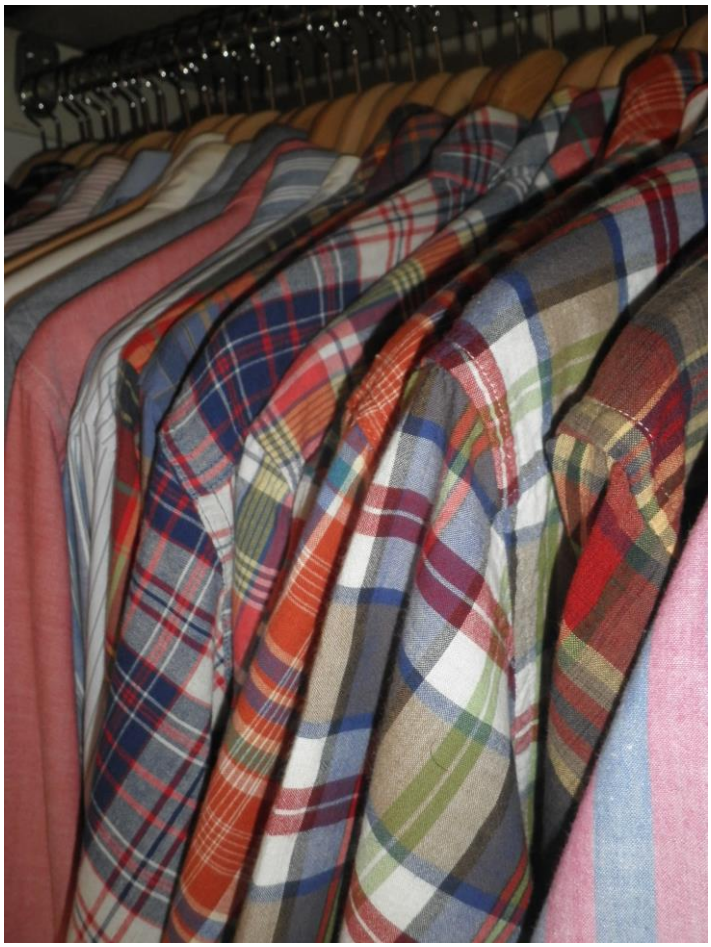

Photo 6 Caption: The author's collection of button-downs

As examples of the American and British button-down, Gant's Yale Co-Op shirt and the Brutus Trimfit have given us some insight into how national narratives imbue clothes with meaning. It is only through their respective fashion narratives that these two nearly identical fashion commodities can be distinguished from one another. When the button-down shirt came to Britain, it had come to stand for the modernizing, rationalizing and democratizing impact of American culture, but was transformed by the particularities of Britain's post-war class system. Just as Britain's class system was flattening out, the button-shirt became part of a narrative originating in British working-class culture. In the United States, the button-down shirt is no longer part of the narrative that made it so compelling to Britons in the first place, having returned to the images of wealth and privilege that inform modern-day 'Prep'.

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