

Cleaning The Closet: Reflections For A New Fashion Ethic

Excerpted from *Sustainable Planet: Solutions for the Twenty-first Century*, Juliet Schor & Betsy Taylor.

A few points worth pondering:

Environmental Impact: Textile production involves toxic dyes that often poison the environment and the surrounding community. For example, cotton which makes up about half of all global textile production is a fertilizer and pesticide intensive crop that endangers both the environment and agricultural workers. While cotton comprises only 3% of the global acreage, it accounts for 25% of world insecticide use. The toxicity in this practice causes a variety of health problems including fetal, brain, kidney and liver damage and cancer in humans as well as harm to birds, fish, bees and other animals and pollution of our water supply. Commercial dying practices are also similar and chemical-based dying is now banned in Germany and other parts of Europe.

Sweatshop Labor: Women make up 70% of the labor force, and work for starvation wages to produce goods sold to American consumers. For example, in Bangladesh which is the fourth largest apparel exporter to the U.S. there is a per capita income of \$1,500 per year, with a 71% female illiteracy rate and 56% of children under the age of five suffering from malnourishment. Wages of Bangladesh's 1.6 million apparel workers range from 8 cents to 18 cents an hour. When demand is high, they work 24 hour shifts, are discouraged from bathroom breaks, get locked inside the factories and report constant headaches, vomiting and other illnesses. Ironically, they cannot even afford to buy the clothes they make. The university caps that they make sell for more than \$20 each in America but they only make about 1.6 cents per cap. In Haiti, Disney pays workers 25 cents per hour to make its T-shirts.

Objectification of Men & Women: In the late 1990s it was heroin chic that glamorized drug abuse and poverty . . . and starting back in the 1960s it was the emaciated waif twigg, the industry is comprised of mega corporations comprised mainly of male designer who often designed impractical, even painful, clothing such as square-toed or over-pointed shoes, short handled purses and hip hugger jeans.

Waste: Thrift stores sell rejects for \$1 a pound, giving much of this rejected clothing to charitable foundations in poor countries such as Africa which are then hit hard by the inflow of cheap and free clothes, with local producers being "priced" out of the market and into poverty. Ironically, often the excess clothing that ends up in Africa, the Caribbean or Asia started off there.

Consumer Debt: Low prices and high volume driven by outrageously high prices and the subsequent "discounting" of items encourages people to buy things and spend more money than they normally would, just for the label. Shopping has become a pastime and an addiction.

Minimalist Fashion Vs. Sustainable Fashion: Some people propose a minimalist fashion ethic which is essentially clothes that are purely functional and comfortable. They buy as few as possible, or better yet, avoid new altogether, shun designer labels and purchase clothes with labor conditions and environmental effects that can be verified. While many people believe this is the answer, minimalist fashion fails to recognize the role clothes hold in human culture, relationships, aesthetic desires and identity. Clothes have helped women get equal rights (such as when they gave up corsets and went for "short" skirts in the 60s), political movements (where would the 60s be without tie-dye and jeans), social status (before the 19th century, European governments regulated dress and fashion to control people of low status and the disregard for these laws signaled a growing social unrest and empowerment), and throughout history, men and women have exercised their creativity through clothing, footwear and accessories.

Clothes are not trivial and there has to be a better solution than minimalist fashion, a more positive vision for clothes and there is—it is called *sustainable fashion* and is guided by a few simple principles:

- **Quality Over Quantity: *Moving from cheap, plentiful to rarer, more valuable*** – If you must purchase new clothing, make it something fine that will last for decades. Think of clothing purchases as long-term commitments.
- **Small And Beautiful: *Creative clothing for local customers*** – Shop at small locally owned and run shops that feature the work of local artists and cater to the creative needs and wants of individuals rather than the masses.
- **Clean Clothes: *Guaranteeing social justice and environmental responsibility*** – Follow the minimalist movement and start purchasing clothes that reflect a greater environmental and social consciousness such as purchasing clothes whose labor conditions and environmental effects can be verified.
- **Make Your Own: *Recycle clothes already in circulation*** – That is what this class is about . . . taking old clothes and giving them a new look. Refashioning, renewing, customizing and wearing! Feel good about your clothes knowing that you are taking care of the earth and the people who live on it.